ANC.

TODAY'S LOVE STORIES

20¢

February 1951

The Vixen

FEATURE NOVEL
by Sally Thornton

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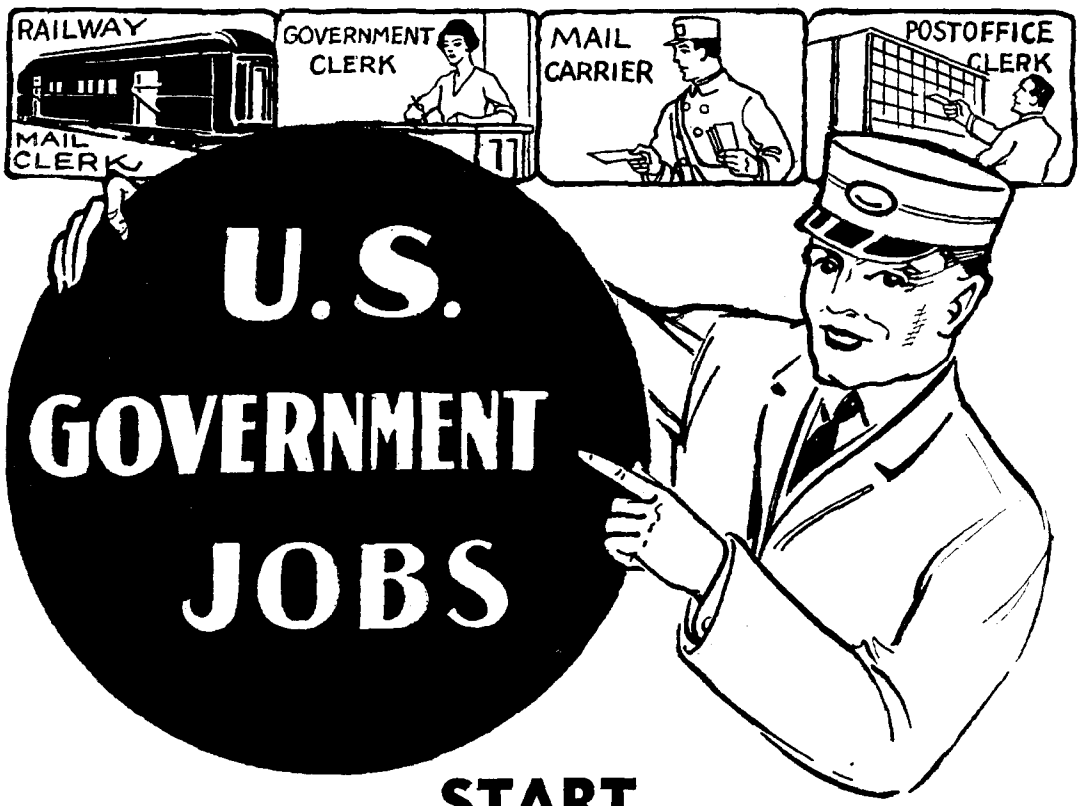

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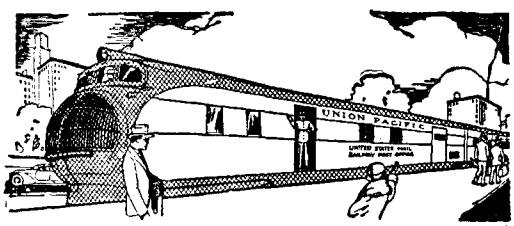

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TODAY'S LOVE STORIES

Marie Antoinette Park, Editor

ROMANTIC FEATURE NOVEL

THE VIXEN ..... Sally Thornton 8

When Griff was given the job of crime photographer on the newspaper, he wasn't told that it had been promised to a vixen named Daphne Larkin. But Daphne decided to stick around and make his life miserable!

THREE COMPELLING NOVELETTES

LOVE IS FOR NIGHT OWLS ..... Mid Hathaway 34

Could her happiest moments be those spent on an island with a man she hated?

FLAME AND DUST ..... Hope Campbell 54

Who would believe that flame-like (on the surface) Eva Eaves was crying because a man kissed her and then blamed it on Spring?"

LOVE COMES TO CAROL ..... Francis Flick 76

"I won't let you break your heart over that guy," Pete told her. "I love you too much to stand around and watch you get hurt."

PLUS

PROPOSAL BAIT ..... India F. Braden 29

Only yesterday, Scott had wanted to marry Terri.

PEN PALS ..... a department 53

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Volume 14 Number 5

LILLIAN MEISEL, Managing Editor

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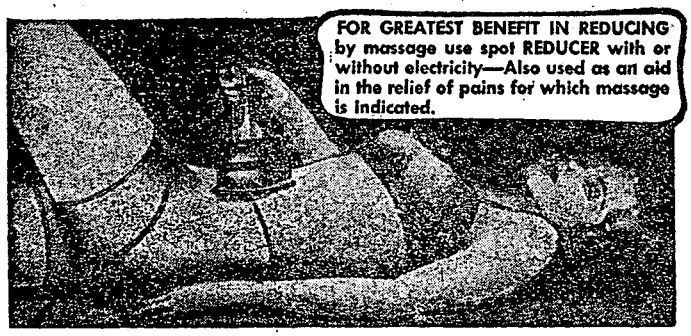

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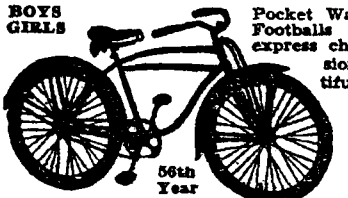

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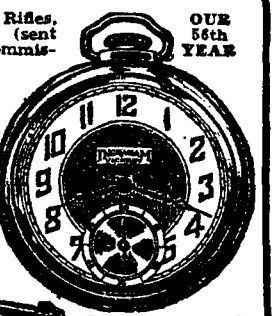

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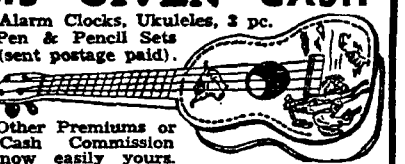

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"Pick that up once more, Vixen," he said roughly, "and I'll spank you until you can't sit down for a year."

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THE VIXEN

by Sally Thornton

Romantic Feature Novel

"I'm your assistant, Mr. Hawkes," Daphne yelled at Griff, and he thought they were the most dreadful words in the world. Until she added, "And you can't fire me, you sneak thief. I'm under contract!"

GRIFF HAWKES grinned as he walked through the noisy City Room of *The Hanford Times* and heard the old familiar clackedy-clack of the typewriters and the shouts for the copy boy. The City Room had almost exactly the same tempo as the *New York Sentinel's*, except that this was in an old red brick building covered with ivy on an old elm shaded street. Griff felt good as he shifted his heavy plate case to his left hand and strode

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to the office Mr. Bush had assigned to him late yesterday afternoon.

This was the perfect life for any big name New York crime photographer, working here in a fine town where things were kept simple and possessed a quality of quiet dignity. He drew in a long satisfied breath and opened his office door.

A bottle of ink sailed at his head and Griff ducked in time. The ink hit and splattered on the white wall.

"What the hell!" he exploded and dropped his plate case.

"And a hearty welcome to you. You sneak thief!" The tall slender girl, standing by one of the two desks, yelled at him.

Griff stared back at her. She was as beautiful as the devil. Her hair was shiny black and her eyes a big, deep luminous black that were shooting sparks now. His own grey eyes hardened as he watched this volcanic eruption; if there was one thing he detested more than anything else, it was a wild tempered witch.

"Why didn't you stay in New York with the thugs and gangsters?" she demanded. "Your type. Why did you have to invade our decent New Hampshire town?" She pushed back a black curl and Griff kept on looking at this pyrotechnical beauty. "Sneaking up here to snatch my job."

He dug out a cigarette. "*Your* job?" he asked politely.

"Yes!" She nodded vigorously. "My job. Mine, Mine MINE!!! Mr. Ephram Bush promised me a year ago, when I started here, that when Nixon left, I could move up as Chief of the Photography Department. But, no; behind my back he jerks in the famous Griff Hawkes from the notorious *New York Sentinel*, whose slogan is, 'If You Don't Read It In The *Sentinel* It Ain't No Crime!' Nuts."

"Well," he said pleasantly, "It's nice knowing you and if you'll remove the body I'll have this other desk moved out and I'll settle in."

"Well, ho, ho, ho!" She toyed with the heavy glass paper weight and Griff watched her warily. If this hellion let go, it could brain him. Then she picked it up and slammed it down on the desk, and he watched a piece fly out of the wood. "I am your assistant, Mr. Hawkes," she yelled it at him. "I work for you. Ho! Ho! Ho!"

"Oh, no," he muttered. He walked to the window and stared out at the big spreading elms and the quiet. This was riding country and a happy thought jumped at him. "Do you ride?" he asked.

"Yes, I ride." She sounded a little nonplussed. "Why?"

"Because," he turned and surveyed her coldly, "I hope you break your neck." He picked up his plate case. "Where's the dark room?"

SHE BIT her lip in indecision, then shrugged her slim shoulders and nodded toward a door at the right. Without speaking, Griff walked a wide circle around her and went into the dark room. He closed the door firmly behind him and expelled a long breath. Definitely, there wasn't space for both of them on the *Times*, one had to go, and he thrust his fingers back through his sandy hair.

If Ephram Bush, the publisher, weren't an old man, Griff would go and beat his ears off. There'd been no mention of any *girl* assistant when Mr. Bush sought him out in New York. Oh, no, indeedie. Mr. Bush had painted a fine roseate picture of Griff's being Chief of Photography and working *with* the city editor, not taking orders for assignments from him. Any photographer's dream. "Just get the pictures, my boy," the Old Man had beamed. "Help solve any crimes. We've never had a big crime photographer, I want to try it for a year."

Probably Griff would have laughed it off, would have drank the very good scotch the Old Man bought and eaten his three inch steak, then gone back to the *Sentinel*. Probably he wouldn't have even remembered the name of the Old Man's paper, if he hadn't been fed up.

It had started with a particularly nasty murder in New York and a lieutenant on Homicide pushing

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Griff around; it had ended with Mona pushing him around. Mostly, of course, it had been Mona. She'd been an eager eyed, hopeful young actress when Griff met her six months ago at a cocktail party, getting no where fast. After a couple of dates, he'd fallen for her and she for him. After that, it was just a matter of time until he took her picture, dozens and dozens, until he finally caught her elusive beauty. The next step had been to pester the producers he knew until he found one who gave her a chance. Then he found her the right agent, a guy who owed Griff a big favor.

Any jerk should have been able to figure it out from there. Any jerk but Griff. Mona got star dust in her eyes, she developed temperament and she had no time for a tall, lean photographer. The night he'd had dinner with old man Bush, Mona had broken the first date she'd given him in three weeks. And, at long last, it had fed him up.

He looked around the dark room equipment and was glad that it was the best. Working here was going to be all right. Really all right. After the girl with the sooty hair and the snorting black eyes departed.

Griff stood for a moment staring at the door of their joint office, then he sighed and strode to it. Purposefully, he opened it and stood there in the open doorway. She was sitting at her desk, her chin supported by the palms of her hands, her elbows on the desk. She was staring at the ink spots splattered on the walls, messing its pristine whiteness.

Griff cleared his throat, but she didn't turn. She just sat there. Probably thinking up more mayhem. "Miss, er....."

"THE NAME," she told him frigidly, "is Daphne Larkin and nobody," she looked around at him, her black eyes challenging, "but nobody calls me Daffy."

Griff suddenly grinned. He had a grin that lit up his eyes and asked you to come along and have some fun. "Daffy," he repeated softly. "That is dandy for you. So apt, so true."

She pushed back her chair violently and jumped to her feet. Her soft moss-green corduroy dress with its crazy flaring pockets, clung to her softly curving figure. She thrust her hands behind her back. "Don't you dare!" She bit off the words between her white even teeth. "Don't you ever dare call me that."

She looked so much like a flaming torch that Griff laughed. It was then she moved with the speed of lightning to snatch up that damn paper weight. She threw back her arm in a hurling position and Griff moved. He caught her and pulled her up close against his chest, so close that even her wiggling struggle couldn't get her loose. Then he caught her wrist and made her drop the weight. It clattered on the desk.

"Pick that up once more, Vixen," he said roughly, "and I'll spank you until you can't sit down for a year." He picked up the paper weight and slid it into his coat pocket before he released her.

Her face was pale. "Brute strength," she blazed at him. "You won because of brute strength. You should feel so proud. I hate men like you. Cocksure and throwing your broad shoulders around. Trying to intimadate girls like me."

Griff smiled sardonically. "I could intimadate you like I could a sputtering stick of dynamite. Now, sit down there and control your temper." When she threw back her head defiantly, he roared, "Sit down!"

After a moment, she muttered, "Brute strength." But she sat.

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Griff canted a hip on the edge of the desk. "Look, Daphne, let's get something straightened out." He dug out a crumpled pack of cigarettes and straightened one of them out, then he handed it to her. After he got his own, he held a match for her and her eyes watched him through the flame. He took a long drag before he went on. "I can't work with a girl. There must be plenty of portrait photographers in this city who'd be glad to have you. Let's go tell Mr. Bush your quitting. Let's act like little ladies and gentlemen."

Her eyes widened and she jabbed out her cigarette. "My," she said. "You make with the jokes, funny man. I have a contract, Big Shot. Come flood or storm, come weal or woe, I have a contract. You *can't* fire me."

Griff glared at her. "I detest girls with tempers. I hate unpredictable wild hellcats."

She stood suddenly, her gorgeous head thrown back. "Well, what do you know? I hate New York smarties. You came here to be a big frog in a little puddle, puffed with self-importance." Before he had an inkling of what she intending doing, she grabbed up the wastebasket and jammed it down over his head. As he dug out from under, he heard the glass in the office door shiver as she slammed it.

Cursing softly, Griff got his ears out and slammed the basket down on the floor. This girl, this unpredictable termagant, he'd spank one day until she learned to behave like a normal person.

LATELY, HIS encounters with girls had left him cautious. Mona had obviously only played him for a sucker and, now, this one was crazy. Two such experiences, tumbling on top of each other, definitely conditioned a man for a cave on the side of a hill, along with other hermit accouterments. If he could just find a good comfortable cave he'd dig in. He'd.....

The door burst open and a dark haired, bright eyed guy stuck in his head. "Hi, there," he smiled. His blue eyes darted around the room and even down under the desks.

"She's gone," Griff said gratefully.

"I don't know why I thought she'd be hiding. Daphne never hides—from anything." The man laughed delightedly. "I'm Steve Johnson, the reporter who'll work with you on any crime, or any tough stuff, like cleaning up any dirty politics."

They shook hands and Griff instinctively liked him. "We'll get along." He grinned and Steve nodded eagerly. "What chance have I of getting Mr. Bush to let Daphne go?"

Steve shook his head. "You ain't got no chance, brother. She's a hot camera, unpredictable as the devil and a wild tempered wench, but she's really good in this racket. I mean really good." He looked at Griff steadily before he finally laughed. "She's in your hair, but she's in my heart. Heaven love you, we're engaged on Monday, she fights with me on Tuesday, by Wednesday she's not speaking, then come Friday and she'll be tentatively engaged again. But by Sunday she's tossing flower pots at my head. Never a dull moment."

"Well, some guys *like* that." Griff felt a deep sympathy for Steve if he were in love with Daphne. She'd run him ragged before they were through, because Steve would never think of trying to make her behave. He'd always accept her and her violent temper and duck the flower pots. She was as much a shrew as Shakespeare's Katherine and she needed taming just as badly.

Griff made up his mind that he'd have to persuade her to quit her job; she'd have to be the one who'd go to Mr. Bush and cry "uncle." He'd never tried to get anyone thrown out of a job yet, and he couldn't start now. Hell, he went around *getting* jobs for people, never getting them fired.

"You have a reputation, Griff, for helping the police solve some murders, but the few we have in Hanford are cut and dried. A husband gets jealous and shoots his wife, then breaks down with remorse and con-

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fesses." Steve grinned. "But old man Bush has wanted a hot camera for years. This town," he paused to light a cigarette, "is controlled by Mayor Claud Sherman and his coterie. He's not too bright, but he's kept down crime by dealing with our so called underworld. In exchange for the police shutting their eyes to a little gambling and the like, there are to be no big time robberies, no gang wars. It's based on the old Pentagast regime in Kansas City and it's worked here. There's graft in Claud's administration, but the taxpayers don't give a damn so long as crime per se is cut to the minimum. But Mr. Bush cares. And I guess that he got you here to dig around in some of Claud's mud pies."

GRIFF LAUGHED. "I know from nothing about politics. If I dug a well I wouldn't find anything. It looks as though I'll have a fine restful vacation here for the next year."

"Julie Larkin, Daphne's sister, is the Mayor's secretary." Steve's eyes lit. "She's a honey blonde and a dream. She phoned me and suggested that I bring you over to the City Hall to meet his Honor and the Police Chief. She's just a kid, but she can surely handle Claud." He chuckled softly.

"Let's go." Griff grinned and slipped a small candid camera into his pocket. It clicked against the paper weight and he sheepishly pulled it out of his pocket. "I was afraid Daffy would brain me," he confessed.

"Brother, if she ever hears you call her that, she will," Steve promised.

Just as they were leaving, the telephone rang and Griff answered it. It was Daphne, her voice low and hauntingly sweet now, so different from her strident yelling that he would never have recognized it. She completely ignored the fury of her exit, it was exactly as though it had never happened. Would Griff, she wondered, come to their house for dinner with Steve tonight? Her grandmother was anxious to meet him. Stunned, he heard himself accepting, although his ears still tingled from that jammed down waste-basket.

This girl was nuts. She was so unpredictable that she must even surprise herself. Daffy, indeed.

Steve was grinning at him when he hung up and Griff could feel the hot color climb up into his face. "Daphne can be wonderful." Steve said. "Or she can slay you."

"Yeah," Griff answered shortly. He didn't add that once you met her you couldn't forget her. He'd thought about Daphne more since he'd met her than he ever had about any girl, and that included Mona.

Getting through the City Room was a long procedure because Steve stopped to introduce him to everyone. The men were a good alert bunch and the girls smart and pretty. One girl with a kind of strawberry hair gave Griff the eye and he found he liked it.

Chapter Two

THERE WAS spring in the air and the birds sang lustily in the verdant trees above them. The air was so clean and fresh that unconsciously Griff drew in a long breath. There'd be golf and hikes in the woods, maybe picnics on the river and swimming in the moonlight. It would be simple and wonderful and it would add a quiet dignity to his life. If he could ever muzzle Daphne.

Griff stopped his car in front of another old red brick building with ivy climbing over its facade. They must like old red brick and ivy here in Hanford, he thought and grinned. He parked in a space marked PRESS.

They ran up the red brick steps and Steve spoke to a couple of cops hanging around the open door. Apparently, the police screened people as they entered the City Hall, which was a funny thing.

Another cop was at the switchboard in the reception room of the Mayor's office and he glanced up. "His Honor expecting you, Steve?" he asked.

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"Call Julie," Steve grinned.

"You guys on the *Times* sure get in easier through Julie to see His Honor than the guys on the opposition paper." The cop shook his head reprovingly. "And do the reporters on the *Blade* burn. You with Steve?" he asked.

"Yes. I'm Griff Hawkes."

"He's our big shot camera up from New York, Pete," Steve explained. "So always let him in when he comes."

"Oh, yeah?" Pete was doubtful. Apparently, his heart belonged to some cute girl on the *Blade*.

In a few minutes a breathtakingly lovely girl came out from the Mayor's private office. Her hair was an aureole of spun gold and her eyes were deep limpid blue. She was slender, with the fragile beauty of a Dresden figurine. When Griff looked down into her soft, gentle eyes he caught his breath. Without even trying, this girl could make a man feel protective and very gentle.

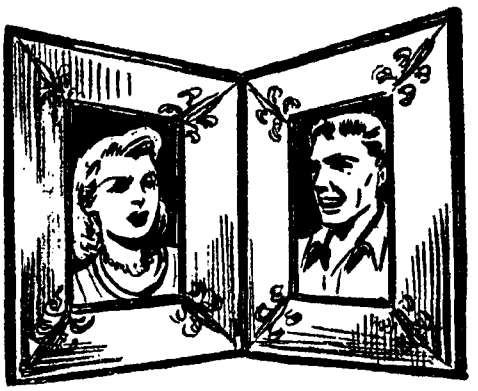
"Julie, honey." Steve put his arm around her and hugged her close to him. "This is Griff Hawkes, Daphne's new boss."

"I know." She smiled. It was really something her smile. Half shy and so sweet it made his throat tighten. How could two sisters be so dissimilar? One so fair and gentle, the other so dark and possessed of the devil?

Her hand was small and cool in Griff's and her eyes, looking up into his, were flatteringly interested. She was aware of him as a man and she liked what she saw. Without even speaking, she made him feel good and right on top of the world. He'd like to know this girl and he hoped she could manage to squeeze him the line for a date once in a while.

"The Mayor is waiting to meet you, Griff," she told him and he loved the soft drawl in her voice. "My goodness, we never expected to have a big famous man like you in our little city. I've seen so many of your pictures in the *Sentinel* and read so much about the wonderful work you've done. I'm so thrilled." She sounded breathless about it. It was wonderful and Griff hoped he wouldn't bust a button on his chest as it expanded.

THE MAYOR was a big handsome man, tremendously photogenic. He had a mane of steel gray and a strong determined jaw, probably just a quirk of Nature, but it let him give the impression of quiet rugged strength. His eyes were clear and you knew that they were looking straight toward the Governor's mansion.



The Mayor sounded a little sonorous as he welcomed Griff to Hanford, and a bit oratorical in his delivery. This guy could make a discussion of the weather sound monumental.

"Where's the firebrand?" The Mayor's eyes twinkled. "Daphne always gets her pictures because the boys are afraid she'll blow up the City Hall if she doesn't." He chuckled softly. "She's the first one they call when anything pops around here."

So, Griff thought disgustedly, temper and hell raising paid her off. It would be harder than ever to persuade her to resign.

Julie's soft mouth tightened. "Daphne practically rides a broom stick." She said lightly enough, but Griff caught the underlying irritation. Well, no one could blame this lovely gentle girl. Having a hellcat sister around couldn't ever be exactly pleasant. Griff glanced at Steve and wished he'd start doing something very definite about Daphne. Surely, he, too, must detest

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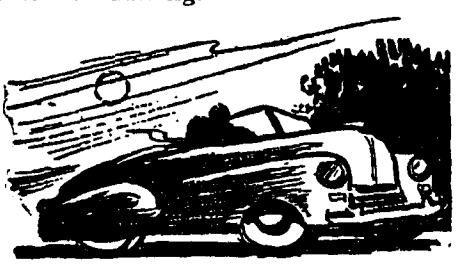
wild crazy girls who tossed flower pots.

The Mayor and Griff exchanged a few more pleasantries, then he introduced Griff to the Police Chief Dan Cummings, who promised the full cooperation of his department should any gory crime break. It was all very nice, very pleasant and meant exactly nothing.

Julie walked out to the reception room with Steve and him. "I've been invited to your house for dinner tonight," Griff told her. And she looked so delighted it warmed through him.

"That's wonderful," she said softly and gave him the full impact of her deep blue eyes. "Grandmother wants to meet you since her darling is going to work for you." There was again that irritation, only this time it was harsher. Maybe the grandmother was a demon, if Daphne was her darling.



"I'm glad that I'll see you my second night in town," he said quietly and she reached up and touched his arm lightly.

Walking down the old brick steps and out into the late afternoon, Steve looked at him quizzically. "What do you think of Julie?"

"She's terrific," Griff said.

"A babe," Steve agreed.

They went back to the paper and Griff talked to the city editor and they made arrangements for handling any hot stuff that came in. Neither of them expected anything really hot and Griff suspected he'd end up taking wedding pictures. Well, he'd been fed up with Mona and New York, it would be nice to take it easy and Julie could make the next year pleasantly exciting. He couldn't think of anything nicer than to ride with her in the moonlight, then park on the bluff above the river. Park there for a long, long time.

GRIFF WENT back to the hotel and put on his new blue suit. It took time to select just the right tie and he finally settled, as he always did, on the plain maroon. After he'd gotten it tied to his liking, he studied himself in the mirror. Nothing spectacular. But nothing, either, that caused dogs to howl and babies to bawl. A good enough lean face with a wide humorous mouth and amused grey eyes. True, it had never exactly stopped any traffic, but most girls had liked it well enough. And Julie obviously hadn't found it too repugnant. All he actually wanted was a light pleasant romance, good enough to add a zest to things, but never enough to drive him to the frenzy of marriage.

He knew that the guys must stand in line for Julie, still she had given every indication that she'd be glad to have him muscle in that line. One thing was certain, any dates they had together would be away from her house. If he had to take her fiery sister all day at the paper, he'd skip her on any nights.

Julie's house was set back among tall spreading trees with a garden at the side. It was white with green shutters, a low sprawling old house that looked a little battered and settled. A good house that offered warmth.

Julie opened the door and stood there waiting. She smiled, half shyly and it was charming. She wore a dress of palest violet tulle with shoulder-framing deep violet flower petals and the only way to describe her, that Griff knew, was out of this world. He was glad he'd worn the new blue.

"Hello," she said gently and her eyes held his, looking up at him from beneath her long black lashes.

"Hello," he answered and thought that this dialogue was certainly hep. He liked the faint mysterious perfume of her golden hair. Before he could say anything, Daphne came and stood in the arch of the living room, her black eyes snapping. Her midnight hair curled softly around

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her beautifully structured face and her dynamic green satin dress with its bared shoulders, clung softly to her figure. But they were the only two things soft about her.

"I see the welcoming committee has tried to gobble you up." She looked at her sister coldly. "Watch her, Griff. She's a man-eater, my sister." Daphne's laugh was too brittle and Julie pushed by and went into the living room.

"Must you always be so rugged?" Griff looked down at her with active dislike. "Julie has been charming and most men she meets want to gobble her."

"You like her type?" She asked it curiously.

"I love the type. It's my type," he answered curtly. "I've never been intrigued by the uncontrolled rotten tempered vixen type. I don't like ink bottles hurled at me, nor wastebaskets jammed down on my ears."

A FAINT PINK brushed her pale cheeks, but she threw back her head defiantly. "Learn to duck, mister." Then she sighed. "Well, I warned you about Julie and, now, it's up to you. Please come and meet Gram."

Gram sat in a rocker by the fire, her silver hair piled high on her head. She wore a black rustling silk dress with a black velvet ribbon around her neck. She looked up at Griff, her old eyes twinkling.

"I'm pretending to be Whistler's Mother tonight," she greeted. "How am I doing?"

Griff laughed and liked this old lady. "You're amazing."

"Good. Usually, I'm the Witch of Endor." She studied him frankly. "You look nice, young man. I hope you can cope with my granddaughter Daphne. She's my pride and joy."

"Why?" he asked bluntly. Anyone in his right mind would think it would be Julie who'd be the old lady's pride and joy.

"Because," Gram said slowly, "when she sets out to do a job she does it. No half measures, no back tracking."

"Couldn't she be less violent about it?" he asked wistfully. He glanced around and saw that Daphne was coming into the big room with Steve, who was carrying a tray with cocktail glasses. "Is she marrying Steve soon?" he asked.

"I wouldn't know. Why don't you ask her?" The old eyes twinkled again.

Steve grinned at him and handed Gram a cocktail. "She's the wonder of Hanford and Gram's my best girl."

"Ummm," Gram snorted. "Come join us, granddaughters, and drink my health."

Julie put her hand on Griff's arm and her fingers pressed gently. It gave him a wonderful warm protective feeling as he smiled down into her deep eyes.

They all solemnly drank Gram's health. Griff was surprised when he saw the old lady wink at Daphne and caught their close intimate companionship. It was almost as though Gram tried to protect Daphne against her own wild temper, knowing that everyone else would always want to protect the lovely Julie. Maybe it was Gram's way of trying to make up to Daphne a little of what her crazy unpredictability cost her.

Dinner was a gay meal, with laughter chasing itself around the table. The chicken pie was delicious, the salad crisp, with a dressing expertly blended with herbs. Griff almost fell out of his chair when he discovered that Daphne had cooked it, even to the deep dish apple pie. He smiled at her when he started thinking what the kitchen must look like after she had whirlwinded through it. Daphne hesitated, then slowly smiled back at him, for that instant her black eyes looked soft and luminous in the flickering candle light.

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They were having coffee in the living room around the fire, when Julie jumped up. "This is dull. I feel like dancing and we do want to show Griff that we have fun spots here, too. Even if it's not New York City."

"I suppose you mean," Daphne said slowly and didn't bother to keep the contempt out of her voice, "that you want to go out to the Tip-Top."

JULIE SEEMED to shrink just a little and she looked frightened when Daphne's eyes bore into hers. "It's so gay out there," she said wistfully.

Griff put his arm around her shoulders. He wanted to protect her against her sharp tongued sister; he didn't want Julie to shrink and ever be afraid. "I'd like to go dance tonight at this Tip-Top," he smiled at Julie. "I'd like it a lot."

Daphne's eyes brushed his face before she turned to Gram. "But, Julie, it's Gram's....."

"Tush. I'm going to bed." She got up stiffly from her low rocker. "I'm seventy-seven today, young man, and I'm going to bed with a blood curdling murder story. Someday soon, Griff, you must come and tell me about New York. I'm avid."

"Oh, Gram!" Julie cried and she looked sick. "I forgot. I, I forgot. Daphne, it wouldn't have hurt you to have told me this was her birthday."

"Julie, I gave up trying to *tell* you anything a long time ago. Come on, Gram, let's hike up stairs and I'll tuck you in." Daphne put her arm around Gram's thin shoulders.

"Not tonight." Steve pushed Daphne aside and caught Gram up in his arms. "Tonight you ride, lady."

"Excuse me, Griff, while I go kiss her goodnight." Julie's voice hardened. "It was rotten of Daphne not to have reminded me."

Griff thought so too, but he didn't say anything. It must be a heavy burden on a girl to have Daphne for a sister. Julie moved close to him and, for a moment, rested her head against his chest, like a little girl who's been scolded and doesn't know quite why. His arms went around her to comfort her, then he leaned down and gently kissed the shining gold of her hair.

She moved away, but at the arched entrance she turned and smiled gently back at him. "You're so nice," she whispered then she ran lightly up the broad winding stairs.

Griff lit a cigarette and looked down into the fire. It was just as well Julie moved away when she did, because he might have kissed her. And he knew now that there could be no light romance with Julie. She was too gentle, too sweetly fragile to play at love. It would have to be for keeps. Well, they might ride in the moonlight, but he'd never park on that bluff looking down on the river.

Chapter Three

THE TIP-TOP CLUB was out on the edge of town, a big grey rambling building in a grove of trees by the river. The music of a hot band blared out at them as Griff pulled up at the entrance and turned his car over to the doorman.

Inside, it was furnished in a lush, over-ripe manner. There was too much chrome and glass, too much black and scarlet, even the deep carpeting was black. Griff decided he'd hate like hell to hit this place with a hangover, it would be dismal.

The girls and Steve seemed to know almost everyone in the big place and he was surprised that Julie should know them all so well. Then he remembered that she was the Mayor's secretary and in that spot she'd have to know practically everyone in town, many of whom must be repugnant to a shy gentle girl. Small time politicians and hangers-on around a City Hall can

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be pretty rough sometimes.

The head waiter bowed low to Julie and led them to an excellent table near the dance floor, yet far enough away so that the hot band wouldn't blow out their ears. They were listening to a girl torch a ballad, when Griff noticed a big broad shouldered man with a small neat mustache, thread his way expertly around the jammed tables. He came up and lightly touched Julie's shoulder.

"Oh, Joe," she said.

"Lo, baby," he answered softly. "I saw you across the room and had to tell you how beautiful you are tonight." His smile was crooked as he touched one of the flower petals on her dress. Griff stood there wondering why she didn't resent this man's easy familiarity. Finally, he decided that she couldn't resent it if he were a political crony of the Mayor's.

Julie introduced Griff to Joe Brandon and he saw that Daphne was rigid with anger, her face stark and white. Daphne barely nodded to Joe, then she went back to staring at the highball glass twisting in her fingers. She looked at it, Griff decided, as though she were contemplating hurling its contents smack into Joe's handsome face.

"Let's dance," Steve said quickly when the band started a rhumba and Daphne got up quickly.

After they were dancing, Joe laughed shortly. "That heller sister of yours, baby, doesn't seem to care whom she snubs. Me, I don't like it."

Julie's voice was low and placating. "She's always mad at someone, Joe. Please don't mind too much."

"I don't like the way Daphne acts," Joe said loudly. "Tell her that, baby. Tell her to watch her step when she comes out here to my place."

"YOU OWN this?" Griff didn't keep the surprise out of his voice, he'd been so confident that Joe was a political crony of the Mayor's.

"Yeah, I own it. Nice joint, huh?" He ran his fingers lightly down Julie's arm and she made no objection. "See you, baby," he told her. His sharp hard eyes appraised Griff. "You're new here, I understand, a new man on the *Times*. Make my place your headquarters, bub, when you want some fun. You'll always be welcome."

"Thanks, Joe." Griff watched him when a waiter came up and told him something in his ear. He was a powerful man, hard and tough. He was no one for Daphne to fool around with. "Dance," he asked Julie and she nodded.

"I wish," she sighed, "that Daphne wouldn't make Joe so mad. I don't do very well at smoothing things out for her."

"Joe is a good guy to watch your step with, I'd imagine." Griff took her in his arms and she danced like a feather floating high on a cloud. Her hand felt cold in his and instinctively Griff tightened his arm around her.

Daphne and Steve danced by them and Griff watched them. Daphne's head was held arrogantly high and her face was very pale. He wished he could get the girl out of his sight and thoughts; the last thing he wanted was to think about her very much. Yet, she made him so damn mad he couldn't help it.

When the band quit, Julie took his hand and her fingers felt warm against his. "I want to put on lipstick." She smiled and her deep blue eyes looked strangely bright. "I'll meet you at the table."

Before Griff could tell her that he wanted to call the paper and let them know where he was in case something broke, she had darted through the crowd. He was held up by the slow moving couples, since he didn't want to do any broken field running. When he finally reached the entrance to the big circular bar he heard Daphne's furious strident voice.

She was standing there yelling at Joe Brandon. She was white with anger, her black eyes blazing up into his cold hard ones. A circle of interested people were laughing and enjoying this immensely and Griff looked around for Steve. He wasn't there, so Griff pushed through the

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crowd.

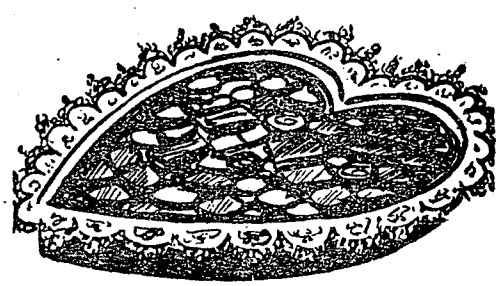
"Take this dame out of here." Joe spat the words. "Or I'll have the heller thrown out."

"No, you won't. You cheap crook," she yelled. "You leave me and my....." Griff grabbed her. He lifted her up and carried her, struggling furiously, out of the bar. He took her outside to the glass enclosed porch before he set her down on her two feet. She was breathing hard and when she tried to dart away, he caught her and held her tightly.

"That guy is really sore, Vixen. He's no softie for you to scream at. He's a tough character and he could get really rough with you."

"Leave me alone." Her voice sounded choked. "I'm not your type, so you stick to my sweet little sister."

HER EYES were deep unfathomable pools as she looked up at him. Suddenly she crumbled against him and a dry sob tore through her taut body. Without quite realizing what he did, Griff's arms went around her. After a while, she drew back and looked up at him, then Daphne reached up and her lips were on his. Warm, alive lips pressing his and he kissed her. It was a long kiss that, somehow, got out of control while Time stood still.



"I'm sorry, Griff," she said and pulled out of his arms. "Put it down to just another mad, mad impulse." Her laughter sounded dry and brittle, almost as though she were crying, when she turned and ran back into the Tip-Top.

Griff could feel the pounding of his heart as the blood coursed through his veins. His hand wasn't quite steady as he lit a cigarette. He didn't even like this wild tempered girl, he couldn't like anyone who fought like a wildcat and hurled things like a Yankee pitcher. But no kiss had ever stirred him as hers had. He dropped the cigarette and ground it under his heel. One thing was for sure, she had to resign her job on the paper because he could not work with her.

As he walked to the telephones he saw Julie look furtively out from behind a half closed door, next to the check room. She turned and smiled up at someone behind her, then Griff saw Joe Brandon's profile. Without thinking, he took out the little candid camera and snapped their picture. He wondered why he'd done it, as he put it back in his pocket, and knew it was the habit of a life time.

Julie came on out into the wide hall and saw Griff. Her eyes widened for a moment and her face flushed angrily before she smiled at Griff. "You saw me with Joe, coming out of his office, didn't you? But promise you won't tell. He, he hates Daphne and I'm so afraid he might do something mean to her." She paused waiting for him to say something, and when he didn't she rushed on. "I went to him to try and smooth over things. Daphne had talked awfully to him right at his own bar and he was livid. I do try to smooth things out for Daphne when she blows her temper, but it is so hard for me."

He patted the hand she'd tucked under his arm. "You're pretty swell to want to help her out. Was she always this bad tempered and unpredictable?"

"No, of course not," she said impatiently. "It's funny, but Mr. Bush thinks she is wonderful because she scares people to death and gets pictures for the paper when the opposition can't. He's given her three raises, big ones, since she's been there. Once when Daphne took portraits of children," Julie laughed softly, "she yelled at them so much that they shook with terror and did exactly what she told them. When

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she quit the photographer she worked for had a nervous breakdown because of the business she lost when Daphne wasn't there. I was away at school until this last year."

Griff wondered if Daphne had been supporting the family until Julie started working for the Mayor. "You got a darn good job when you got out of school."

"Oh, Daphne got it for me. A try out, anyway. I made good and old Sherm, our handsome Mayor, loves me like a daughter." She giggled. "He's a doll to work for and he certainly likes Daphne." She looked wistfully out toward the enclosed porch. "It's a lovely night." Her eyes fluttered at him from beneath her long lashes. "Let's go look at the moon, Griff?" Her voice was low and hauntingly sweet.

UNHUH, he thought. After his kiss with Daphne he didn't want any repeat performance. Actually, Griff was no wolf, he was just lonely and he'd always gone for the light romances, with plenty of fun and laughter and no one getting hurt. But the memory of Daphne's warm lips against his still stirred him and he couldn't go out with Julie. Not with this look in her lovely eyes.

"They may be wondering about us." He smiled and felt like a stuffed shirt and Julie acted as though she definitely agreed. Oh, hell, he thought as he walked beside her into the jammed dining room.

Daphne was sitting alone at the table, twirling a glass around in her slender fingers. "Where's Stevie?" Julie asked.

"Gone." Daphne shrugged. "He got mad and I got mad, so he went home. I thought you'd not mind riding me home, Griff."

"Of course not." He caught a waiter's attention and nodded. "Let's have the check, please," he told the hovering man.

The waiter beamed. "This is on Mr. Brandon. He was glad to have you as his guest."

"Now, wait just a minute." Daphne glared at the waiter. "That bum isn't paying for anything for me. I'm....."

"You," Griff cut in softly, "shut up. Otherwise, I'll turn you over my knee and spank the hell out of you right here. You've caused enough trouble tonight."

"Why, you fool!" she kept her voice low, but she started to push back her chair.

Griff reached over and grabbed her wrist. She must have seen grim determination on his face because she looked frightened for a moment. "At least," she said with dignity, "don't use your brute force to spank me here. Kindly confine the demonstration of your brutality to the office or my home."

"Will you behave, Daphne?"

"I am leaving." She jerked away and jumped to her feet. But Griff was just as fast and he caught her arm and pulled her close to his side.

"You're going with me, Vixen," he bit his words. Brother, he'd get rid of her in the Photograph Department, or he'd resign himself. This girl made him so mad he saw red and he actually wanted to spank her, but good. He threw down some bills on the table and the three of them pushed their way through the crowd until they finally reached the entrance.

Julie looked angry as she pushed ahead of Daphne and sat between them on the front seat. Griff drove fast, suddenly wanting this night to end. He couldn't understand why Steve had left he'd seemed such a nice easy going guy and certainly he knew Daphne. By now he should be resigned to her tantrums and expect nothing else.

Curiosity finally got the better of him and he asked, "Why did Steve get boiling and leave?"

Daphne didn't answer for a moment and when she did her voice sounded tight. "He happened to walk out on the porch and he didn't happen to like what he saw."

GRIFF cursed softly under his breath. Of all the rotten things to have happen. How could he tell

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Steve that it had been just one of those things that didn't mean a thing to either Daphne or him? Or did it? Look, he told himself, how dumb can a man get? It was only an impulse of Daphne's and he didn't even like her. Yet, it wouldn't be fun explaining it to Steve.

"This fight with Steve," Julie said angrily, "has spoiled my evening. Griff is my date and I don't see why you had to fight with Steve. Just *once* couldn't you two get along?"

"You'll have plenty of time, precious, to work on Griff." There was that cold contempt again in her voice when she spoke to her sister.

He stopped in front of their old house and walked up on the porch with them. He refused when Julie tried to persuade him to come in for a night cap, it was late and he didn't like the mockery in Daphne's eyes. Julie muttered something and stalked into the house.

"Thanks for driving me home." Daphne smiled crookedly. "But it was partly your fault that Steve got mad."

"Sure," he said curtly. "Well, I'll see you, Daffy."

She stiffened and before she knew what was happening, she drew back her arm and hit him hard across his face. "I told you not to dare call me that. I *told* you."

"You devil," he flung the words over his shoulder. "Don't bother rushing to work in the morning. Any morning. Nuts."

It took Griff a long time that night to get to sleep. He tossed and turned, then sat up and jabbed at his pillow. Every time he closed his eyes he saw a black haired wench with smoking dark eyes. Sometimes she was hurling an ink bottle, then a fist, or maybe a waste-basket for variety. Why he should think about her he didn't know. It was funny that a man should dislike a girl intensely, and still have her keep him awake. Still remember her kiss that made Time stand still, for those moments, when she was in his arms.

Hell, he'd count sheep. One...two ...three...four...five...

Chapter Four

THE TELEPHONE was blaring when Griff jerked open his eyes. The dawn was just creeping through the windows as he grabbed the phone. "Yeah?" he growled.

It was Steve. "There's a three alarm fire down in the tenement district," he snapped. "Get going. Daphne and I will pick you up at your hotel in three minutes. She's got your camera and plates."

"Coming." Griff leapt out of bed and into his clothes. He tore out of his room and made it to the lobby in three and one quarter minutes.

Steve was out in front of the hotel and he started his car as Griff landed in the back seat. The sky was red with the reflection of the flames and the street was already filled with shouting, excited men and cars.

They drove fast and down across the town they could feel the heat and hear the crackling of the wooden buildings. They turned a corner on two wheels and came to an abrupt stop. Daphne caught her breath at the terrible destruction, then she shoved his camera and plate case at him and jumped out of the car lugging her own. She wore dark blue slacks and a white angora sweater. And on her they looked wonderful.

It was a holocaust, with the flames shooting high into the dawn, their

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red mingling with the colors of the sunrise. There were cries as the people stood there staring at the ruins of their homes. Most of them were pale, their eyes stark with their misery. Griff moved in close and got his pictures. He could feel the heat on his face as he took this terrible magnificence of destruction.

He had just shoved in another plate when he saw Daphne put down her camera and run into a belching doorway of smoke. "No, Daphne!" he yelled. She didn't hear. And he ran after her.

He shoved and pushed his way through the milling crowd and into the circle of firemen handling the big hoses. He jumped over the coils of hose in his frantic effort to reach Daphne. The little fool. The crazy, wonderful damn fool.

Griff had just reached the smoking doorway when he saw Daphne with a child in her arms staggering out through the smoke. The child's head was buried in her sweater and she held a handkerchief over her own mouth and nose. She was outside when Griff heard the stairway crash in the building.

Somehow, after she'd given the child to a sobbing mother, Daphne got mixed up in a fireman's hose. The man whirled to see what had happened and turned the spray so that water poured over Daphne for a moment. But it was long enough. Griff grinned as he snapped a picture of her, drenched.

"Come on, honey," Steve yelled and grabbed her. He put his coat around her dripping shoulders and hurried her to his car.

"Griff, my camera," she called.

"Coming." He finally found it. An old man was guarding them and when Griff thanked him, he didn't answer. He only stared dumbly at the blazing buildings. Watching the old tenement burn to the ground, knowing he had lost his home. All that he had.

When Griff reached Steve's car there was an old blanket wrapped around Daphne and she was shivering. He put his hand on her shoulder. "That was a crazy thing to do. You could so very easily have been killed." He wondered why his eyes suddenly stung and told himself it had to be the smoke. Of course.

"I saw the kid." Daphne brushed back her wet hair. Her face was streaked with grime and the sweater was no longer white, yet she never looked more beautiful. "I think the kid panicked because I just caught a glimpse of him clutching the stairway. There wasn't time to get anyone else, so I ran in for him." She squeezed out water from her hair. "I'm glad I could get him," she said simply. She squeezed some more and added, "Some day I'll get that dumb fireman who wet me down."

"You through with your pictures?" Steve asked Griff. He was no longer the easy going friendly guy of yesterday. He was remembering that he saw Griff kiss his girl last night.

"I'm through. I even got a picture of Daphne dripping." He climbed into the back. He'd have to talk to Steve about kissing Daphne and he didn't want to. He didn't want to talk to anyone about it.

"I got some really terrific shots." Daphne told him. "Horrible ones. I'm in practice," she said bitterly. "This is the third tenement in this district that's gone up in smoke in the last four weeks."

"What?" Griff moved forward and leaned on the back of the front seat. "That's too coincidental not to stink."

"It stinks," Daphne agreed. "But good."

They came to a tavern, one of those nondescript little neighborhood places, only this was a poor neighborhood. Steve stopped. "Right now, you need a drink and a seat on a hot radiator."

"She needs most of all to go home and change her clothes. I'll take in her pix with my own," Griff said. Daphne gave him a withering glance.

"I work for the *Hanford Times*, remember?" Her voice sounded like dry ice. "And I take in my own pictures. I don't trust them to anyone."

Griff's ears burned and anger boiled in him. "Listen, Vixen, I take the best damn pix in the cockeyed

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world and I don't need to swipe anyone's. Least of all yours."

"My, my," she murmured and piled out of the car, dragging the old ratty blanket.

The tavern was clean and warm, over in a corner a radiator sizzled and spat steam. Daphne rushed to it and climbed aboard. She jumped about five feet, a look of stunned surprise on her face and Griff shouted with laughter.

"When a radiator hisses, sweetheart, it's hot."

"Very, very funny." She glared at him and pulled around a chair from the round table, she put it as close as she could to the hissing radiator. In a moment her dark blue slacks began to steam.

Steve came in with three scotches and Daphne sipped hers gratefully, hoping it would warm through her. Griff lit a cigarette for her and she nodded her thanks. She looked a little like an old Indian as she hunched over the heat, the ragged blanket draped over her shoulders.

"Tell me more about these fires." Griff leaned his arms on the table and looked at Steve.

"All right, crime hound." Steve's voice was stiff with dislike. "This is the third in four weeks. Right after the first tenements burned down, Joe Brandon bought up the property. Two bunches of lots in strategic positions, considering what's going to break in the paper tomorrow from the Mayor's office. The Fire Department and the police tried to make it arson, but they couldn't. If someone did set those fires, he knew his stuff. No smelly kerosene, no dirty rags left behind."

Griff drummed his fingers on the table, his grey eyes narrowed. "There are certain chemicals that would ignite when a room reached a certain temperature and so start a fire. And they'd leave no trace. But," he shrugged, "who could get hold of them?"

"Who indeed? The catch is that tomorrow the Mayor is going to announce that the city is buying all that tenement property and going to convert it into modern low priced housing. Joe Brandon holds two key spots and he can make plenty of quick money."

"Who's his pipeline into the Mayor's office?" Griff asked.

"Julie thinks that it could be Jim Davis in the Bureau of Engineers. But she has no proof whatsoever." Steve crushed out his cigarette.

"Couldn't Julie try hard to find out something about this today?" He looked at Daphne. Her face was very white and her black eyes seemed fathoms deep. "She's right there where things are happening and we might help her frame it so someone would walk into the trap."

Daphne stared at him for a long time. Then she jumped to her feet and shoved the round table at Griff. It tipped, spilling glasses, ice and liquor and landed in his lap. "I'm getting in my pictures. I work for Mr. Bush and he's probably yelling his head off because I'm not there. Maybe," she glared at Griff, "he'll be wondering what has happened to his big shot."

"Why, you crazy imp." Griff exploded and shoved the table. But Steve stood there, a thin piece of smile on his lips.

"I'm not driving you into town. This time Daphne gets a beat on you because you're going to have to wait for a cab." There was cold hatred in Steve's eyes. "I want you to leave my girl alone. I have enough trouble trying to get Daphne to marry me without having you muscle into it. I'm warning you, you stay away from Daphne, or I'll beat your brains out."

Griff's face hardened and his eyes were cold grey slate. "You're crazy, Steve. That, that kiss last night was just one of those things. Daphne is definitely not my type, nor am I hers. But, get this. No guy shoves me around. You're not married to her, you're not even engaged and I'll see her if she'll let me. If you want to fight it out, let's go." It came to him with a sudden shock that he actually wanted to smash his fist into Steve's pleasant face.

"I'm taking Daphne right to the paper, so I haven't time to stop to

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fight you," Steve said curtly. "But you'll be seeing me around."

"Any time. Any where." Griff stalked to the bar and asked for the phone. The bartender blinked at him, took out his toothpick and pointed to a phone booth. "Steve," Griff called as he went out the door, "drop my camera and plate case on the curb."

Steve didn't answer. He just went out of the tavern and the slam of the door reverberated through the place. That damn kiss had caused all this mess, and Steve was the reporter with whom Griff was to work for the next year.

He called for a taxi and, as he hung up, he remembered that last night he'd never made that call to the paper. That's what Daphne had done to him. He'd wished he'd never seen her sooty hair and flashing black eyes. Never in his life.

Chapter Five

THE SUN was high when Griff finally got back to the paper ...and he was angry. He gave his pictures to the man in the dark room to be developed, and, as he turned away, he remembered something. It was a subconscious memory of another picture. He reached into his back pocket and took out the negative of Julie and Joe taken in the doorway of Joe's office. He juggled it for a moment, undecided, and then made up his mind that he'd develop it himself at some future time. After all, it wasn't important. He scarcely knew why he'd taken it, excepting from force of habit.

Daphne was at her desk. He started to laugh as he saw she was still wearing the blanket around her slim shoulders, but he sobered quickly when he saw that she was shivering.

"You'd better let me run you home, kid. You're worth a lot more to the paper when you're well. You'll get pneumonia that way."

"I haven't time for pneumonia," she said, and sneezed.

"And I haven't time to argue with you. Let's get going." He literally shoved her out of the office and into his car.

As they stopped in front of her house she asked, "Have you had breakfast?"

Griff looked unhappy. "Who's kidding," he answered briefly and followed her into the house.

Her grandmother wasn't yet downstairs, so Daphne shoved the early edition of the Hanford Times into his hand. "Read it until I get down. I'll grab a hot bath and quick change, then I'll get some breakfast for us both.

Griff looked at the paper. It seemed odd, to be sitting downstairs in Daphne's home, waiting for her to fix breakfast. He kept remembering the way the sun had got tangled in her dark hair. She'd been just as attractive, he admitted to himself, with no make-up and her hair only halfway dry in the bright morning sunlight.

The time passed quickly, and he was surprised when she tapped him on the shoulder, murmuring, "Asleep?"

He shook his head, and she said, "Well, come out into the kitchen and help me fix breakfast."

She worked surprisingly fast and looked cute as she hurried around. But the peace between them couldn't last. "Steve's awfully angry with us," she told Griff over her shoulder.

"The idiot!" he broke out irritably, "didn't he understand that kiss didn't mean a thing?"

There was a loud thump as Daphne put down the frying pan. "Absolutely nothing," she agreed and turned around to face him slowly. "And Steve wants me to marry him in two weeks."

It gave Griff a funny feeling in his chest as he realized that he didn't want this thing to happen, and the feeling didn't make sense, because he hated bad tempered wild Vixens like Daphne.

He was hardly aware that he was putting his arms around her and drawing her close to him. "Maybe this kiss will be different," he whispered.

He was holding her more tightly than he'd meant to, and her slim

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form softened in his embrace. He kissed her hard, and, at first, deliberately. Then it wasn't deliberate. It was just something that neither of them wanted to end.

His lips were still clinging to hers when they heard a noise and Griff looked up to see her grandmother standing in the doorway. She was beating on the floor with her cane. "I'm hungry," she said calmly. "Or I wouldn't stop you two young people from enjoying yourselves."

Griff felt embarrassed color flood his face, but Daphne seemed to take it in her stride. Later, Griff was amazed at the way she was able to carry on light conversation at breakfast.

At the end of the meal Daphne laid her napkin down beside her plate and announced, "I'm going to marry Steve, Gram."

The old lady nodded. "So you've been telling me, dear."

"Two weeks from now, Gram."

Even her grandmother looked surprised.

"Daphne's not in love with him," Griff said loudly.

With that, Daphne jumped up, her eyes blazing. "It's none of your business," she said. "And now I think we'd better get back to the office."

They drove back in unhappy silence each one going over to his desk like a sulky child. There was a call for Griff that Mona had put in to him from New York. But, strangely enough Griff had no interest in what Mona had to say. He didn't put back the call.

A few minutes later she called again. "Hi, Stranger," Mona's high voice came over the wire.

Griff hated to be called stranger, especially by someone who obviously hadn't cared how or where he'd been.

"You don't sound very happy to hear from me," she pouted. Griff could picture the way her full red lips were pursed up as she waited for his answer.

"Of course I have," he answered gruffly, and even to his own ears it sounded unconvincing. But Mona didn't seem to recognize its insincerity. She prattled on, about the trouble she was having with the cast of her new play, and, finally, getting around to the purpose of her call:

"Why don't you come back, Griff?" she wheedled. "I miss you."

He smiled wryly. Maybe, though, it might be best to go back. Hanford certainly wasn't giving him any peace. "Sit tight, Mona, baby," he said. "Maybe papa will be back soon."

He caught Daphne glaring at him for no reason at all, and then there was the sound of the door slamming behind her. Daphne had left the office with even less than her usual calm.

He shrugged his shoulders and wondered idly at the difference between Daphne and her sister Julie. At the thought of Julie a lot of questions came to his mind, mostly about her position at the City Hall and her relationship to Joe Brandon. It was not too far fetched to think that she might be the pipe line that led from City Hall to the nightclub owner. But he knew that it wouldn't do any good to question her. And all hell would break loose if he talked about it to Daphne.

He remembered the picture he'd taken last night and decided to go into the darkroom and develop it.

When he saw the result he let out a low whistle. The candid camera had caught both their expressions and there was no need to label it Love.

He left the print to dry and decided that he'd go out to the Tip Top and talk things over. Julie, he realized had not gone into Joe's office just to smooth things over for Daphne. He remembered, too, how Joe had slid his fingers up her arm and she had made no protest.

He was ready to leave when Steve came in. Steve didn't beat around the bush. "Daphne's going to marry me within two weeks, Griff. And in the meanwhile, you're to stay the hell away from her.

Griff burned. "What's the matter? Afraid you can't hold her?" He hated the possessive tone in Steve's

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voice when he referred to Daphne.

Steve startd to swing at Griff, but Griff lashed out and landed a sock on his jaw that crashed him to the floor.

Griff felt better after that. He automatically rubbed his knuckles as he left the building.

They were cleaning up the Tip Top when Griff arrived. In the daylight, it looked cheap and tawdry; but what interested Griff was the sound of Daphne's voice yelling from Joe's office.

"She really gets around," he muttered, and went over toward the office, walking softly. They did not see him until he stood in the doorway.

"What are you doing here?" Joe asked belligerently.

"I came to talk to you about Julie," Griff said softly. "I want to find out just how much there is between you two."

"Oh, you snoopy butt-in, you just get out of here," Daphne shrieked at him and Griff ducked, just barely managing to miss a decanter she'd hurled in his direction.

But Joe smiled suavely. "And just how did you arrive at that dumb conclusion?"

"I didn't," Griff said. "I snapped a picture of you both last night. The camera doesn't lie."

It was Daphne's face that stopped him, although Joe was the one who spoke. "Julie's a cute girl," he slapped Griff on the back in friendly fashion. "Why shouldn't I try to make a little time. But I've never got anywhere with her, so I don't know what you're talking about."

"And you don't know what I'm talking about," Griff said bitterly, "when I bring up the fact that tomorrow the Mayor is announcing that the City will take over tenement property for low price housing.... Well, there are snakes like you in every town, but we smoke 'em out!"

He was so angry that he turned on his heel and left, and if Daphne wanted to stay, which she evidently did, it was no concern of his. He hurried back to the office.

A sixth sense almost warned him of what he would find. The print he'd left drying was gone and so was the negative.

He stood for a moment in the doorway of the large outside office, watching Steve type out a story. Before he stopped to think twice, he went over to him and accused him of stealing the picture.

Steve stopped typing long enough to look up into his face wearily. "You need some sleep," he said. "I don't know anything about. But my advice to you is to mind your own business."

"Nobody *ever* admits knowing what I'm talking about, lately," Griff muttered, and mixed with his anger the bitter knowledge that there were some answers that he really didn't want to have to know.

But, there were some things he was darned well going to find out.

He went down to the corner coffee shop and drank two cups of strong black coffee. Then he went out to Daphne's. He wasn't sure whether she'd gotten home yet but he was too nervous and upset to wait around.

"Daphne's upstairs," her grandmother told him. "I'll tell her you're here." But Daphne had heard his voice and called, "I'll be right down."

He sat in front of the fireplace, smoking morosely. Her grandmother came in and sat beside him.

"Daphne's tired," she said wistfully. "I wish she didn't have to work so hard."

Griff tried to look sympathetic. "She ought to give up her job," he said and hoped it didn't sound as sarcastic as it was meant.

The old lady shook her head. "I wish she could. But ever since we lost our nest egg Daphne's been taking care of us. Of course, Julie is able to help a little now that she's working."

Daphne came in then, and her grandmother left them alone. Griff looked at Daphne bitterly. "You've been covering up for Julie all along, haven't you? You've known that Julie was in love with Joe and you've suspected that she's been spilling eve-

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rything to him that he wanted to know!"

Wearily, Daphne admitted it. "She thinks that Joe will marry her. I've tried to argue with her but it's no use. And, after all, Griff, she's my sister." She said it without apology. He noticed the dark circles under her eyes and stifled a feeling of pity.

"I've always had to take care of Julie," Daphne went on tonelessly, "and I've had to make a lot of money in order to keep her in school and the house going. I guess it's a habit now." She grinned, "I've had to build a lot of habits—like being unpredictable and bad-tempered. I've found that the only way to make people notice me is to raise the devil. It's gotten me into places that I never could have crashed as a calm, even tempered lady."

"Then," Griff said slowly, "you really *are* calm and even-tempered. You just pretend to be a Vixen—"

She didn't even argue. She just nodded. "I can stop it now," she admitted. "I'm going to marry Steve and—"

He grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her. "You're not going to marry Steve!" he yelled.

"Yes I am, too!" she yelled back.

With that, Griff laid her across his knee and spanked her. And it wasn't until he'd set her back on her feet that he noticed Steve standing in the doorway.

"All right," Steve said to Daphne. "Take him. Any man who spanks you and you don't kill you must love."

The answer was in her eyes. "But Griff," she whispered, "I've been raising hell for so long.... It may take a while....."

He grinned. "I'll help. First of all, Julie will have to sever all her connections with Joe and then go and tell the Mayor the truth—"

"Now, you wait a minute....."

"Baby, don't forget; if you act like a vixen you're going to get treated like a vixen."

He lifted his hand, as if he were going to spank her and for a moment he was frightened because he didn't know whether she was going to fight back.

But she relaxed and Griff smiled down at her gently. She was everything he wanted and he was bright enough to know it.

THE END

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Scott rebuked her, "Love like ours doesn't happen accidentally."

Proposal Bait

by India F. Braden

Why had Scott changed? Only yesterday he had wanted to marry her!

SCOTT proposed to Terri in the middle of the tennis court with his whole youth organization looking on.

"The boys might as well get a lesson in romance along with their other classes," he laughed, kissing Terri over the tennis net. "Darling, I had honestly meant to wait until tonight to propose when the moon had come out and there was soft music, but you looked so cute and tantalizing in that outfit and you are such a dear and I'm so mad about you, I just couldn't wait another minute to ask you to marry me!"

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Terri smiled. She was so happy that it frightened her. Could this really be herself, plain little Terri Parks, standing on the brink of paradise? Marrying Scott would surely be a paradise because he was the answer to the most discriminating maiden's wildest dream. Scott had looks, personality, brains, and scads of money. And Terri had fallen head over heels in love with him that first day she'd heard him make that speech at the community center about his youth organization.

Scott was using a large part of his money for a very good cause. He had bought Palm Lane, a gorgeous mansion in the center of this western winter resort to bring underprivileged boys from the large eastern cities for a winter vacation. Scott had hired teachers for the boys during their three weeks stay so that they wouldn't get too far behind in their studies. At the end of each three week period a new group of boys arrived at Palm Lane.

And to watch the group of boys that were leaving say good-by to Scott Andrews was really something. Terri had been at the station one afternoon when their train pulled out and you would have thought Scott hung the moon. The boys were so grateful to him.

But not only the boys vacationing at Palm Lane thought Scott was wonderful. The whole town of Mountainview went for him. Especially Terri's family, especially Terri herself. But she never thought he would fall for a girl with plain brown hair, pale blue eyes and a timid smile.

"Next on the program, boys, is the swimming party," Scott said as they all left the tennis court. The boys gave an ear splitting war whoop and headed for the bath house to jump into their swim trunks.

But Terri noticed that the sun had gone down and a wind had started.

"I don't think I'll go in, Scott," she said, "I'll just watch you and the boys from the side of the pool."

Scott looked disappointed, but he didn't insist. So Terri perched in a lawn chair on the side of the beautiful outdoor pool. She hadn't wanted to get in the water with the sun down because she was afraid of getting fresh cold.

Terri had had pneumonia a few months before Scott had come to Mountainview. And she had been so slow in her recovery that her doctor had prescribed that she turn her little children's toggery shop over to someone else to run for a few months while she got lots of sunshine and fresh air.

AS SOON as Terri met Scott she learned how athletic he was and how he loved the outdoors. He went in wholeheartedly for every sport you could mention. So Terri decided that she would learn to participate in several sports and not say anything to Scott about how puny she was. After all it wasn't anything serious and she'd recovered completely in a short time.

She was sure that not knowing how to play golf, or tennis, or shuffle board or being outstanding in any outdoor sports had made Jimmy Towns, her other admirer, lose interest in her. And she wasn't going to let it happen again. Terri had always been the kind of girl who liked to sew and cook and keep house.

Scott was diving from the highest dive and all the boys were watching him and clapping and yelling. Terri was also watching him with little shivers of excitement running up and down her spine. She couldn't decide which charmed her most, the breadth of his shoulders, his tallness or the intense blueness of his eyes.

Terri moved closer to the side of the pool to get a better look at Scott when, suddenly, the boys all jumped in the water belly-flop fashion at the same time.

Terri felt the cold water dashing over her. She gasped in horror! The boys had drenched her, and getting wet out in this wind might bring back her chest cold!

Terri cried, "You crazy kids, why don't you watch what you're doing?" She knew her voice was irritated, but she couldn't help it. Now she'd have to go right to the bath house,

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take off her dress and dry it immediately.

Terri disappeared and while she was drying her clothes she was sorry she'd stormed at the boys. But already her throat was beginning to feel sore. She'd have to be careful.

The boys were coming out of the water when Terri emerged from the bath house, dried and freshly made up.

Scott said, "Terri, the wind doesn't seem to be any worse and the boys want to build a camp fire and get you to tell them some stories."

Terri frowned. She couldn't risk sitting out in the cold night air the way her throat felt.

"Scott, why don't you tell the stories tonight and I'll go inside and sit with Mrs. Caine, the housekeeper," Terri suggested.

"Just as you say, dear," Scott replied, walking over to help the boys get wood to start the camp fire.

Terri thought the evening would never end. Not that Mrs. Caine wasn't pleasant to talk with, but she wanted so frantically to be with Scott every possible minute.

But when Scott did come in from the camp fire with the boys it was already late. Then they all insisted that he join them in a bedtime snack of milk and crackers. So by the time Scott left to take Terri home it was quite late and Scott seemed strangely quiet and withdrawn. But there was nothing quiet or withdrawn about his good night kiss. It was full of fire and excitement, the promise of thrilling things to come. Terri felt as though her heart would burst with happiness when Scott whispered huskily, "Call you tomorrow night, honey."

THE NEXT day Terri decided to drop in Terri's Tiny Tot Shop and see how Cleo Baker was getting along. Cleo was a striking blonde who went heavily for glamour. Terri had never particularly liked her, but Terri's mother wanted her to let Cleo run the shop for her because Cleo's family were having financial difficulties. So to please her mother Terri had hired Cleo to take over the Tiny Tot Shop until Terri could return to work.

Cleo was perched in a chair behind the counter reading a magazine when Terri walked in. Terri knew that there were a million things she could have been doing, but she wasn't surprised to find her loafing. And Terri was too happy this morning to complain or find fault with anything. So she just asked Cleo how business had been the last few days.

"Not too fast," Cleo answered. "Maybe it's the weather or the season or something."

Then Terri told Cleo about her engagement to Scott Andrews. Cleo's mouth fell wide open. "You mean you landed that gorgeous hunk of man!"

It was plain to see that Cleo was amazed. Terri couldn't much blame her. She was rather amazed herself that the most eligible young man in the whole southwest had proposed to her.

Suddenly Terri realized that Cleo was green with envy. That didn't surprise Terri either. Now for the first time in her life she'd get to see how it felt to be really envied. Of course it had been nice to be the owner of the Tiny Tot Shop, but her father had bought it and set her up in business and she really didn't feel that it was anything she'd gotten for herself. But Scott's proposal was different. She'd gotten that all by herself. The bait she'd used had been her own down-to-earth common sense. And it had worked like a charm.

Terri went in the back of the shop and began to look over a new shipment of fall baby clothes. Cleo turned her chair around and Terri noticed that she kept staring at her. Cleo, it seemed, was trying to discover what it was about her that had attracted Scott Andrews.

In a few minutes Cleo said, "Terri, I've got a chance to change my beauty parlor appointment if you'll let me off now. It's three o'clock and that will give me lots of time to pretty up for my heavy date tonight."

Terri was too happy to refuse a

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favor even to Cleo. And anyway, it wouldn't hurt her to keep the shop for a couple of hours.

Terri closed the shop at exactly five o'clock and hurried home. Scott usually called about six thirty or seven o'clock. At dinner she discussed with her parents what she'd do with the toggery shop after she married Scott. Her mother insisted that she run the shop herself after Terri was married. Her father disagreed. He had always believed that a woman's place was in the home.

In the midst of their argument Scott's phone call came. But it didn't put roses in Terri's cheeks and a lilting song in her heart. In fact his words choked her. "I'm sorry, Terri," he said over the wire, "but I won't be able to make our date tonight. I'll call you later. Good night."

There was no darling, honey, or dear to his conversation, not a single endearing word to keep Terri hoping. And everything to make her sure that Scott had changed toward her. But why? Only yesterday he'd wanted to marry her!

FOR TWO nights Scott didn't call Terri. The third night he called only to say that he was afraid he'd been too hasty and that when he got right down to facing facts he'd decided that his freedom was pretty valuable. He said they would still be good friends but Terri knew that could never happen. She loved Scott too madly to be friendly with him. It was all or nothing at all where Scott was concerned.

So the next two weeks Terri found out what it was like to cope with a broken heart. She had thought she was heart broken when Jimmy Towns dropped her, but she knew now that only her pride had been hurt. Her heart hadn't ever been touched until Scott came into her life.

Terri was so miserable around the house with nothing to do that her doctor insisted that she go back to work. So she let Cleo go and took over the shop herself.

There was always a lot of gossip and news around the shop with women coming in all day, and Terri soon learned that Cleo Baker was being escorted everywhere by Scott.

Terri almost fainted. Cleo had evidently sized her up and decided that if a plain girl like Terri could get a proposal out of Scott, a gorgeous blonde like herself could break it up.

So she'd set about to do it. Terri didn't know how she'd managed but she'd evidently done a pretty thorough job since she hadn't seen or heard from Scott since his last and fatal phone call.

One afternoon a few days later Terri was waiting on one of her most trying customers. Mrs. Higgins, a large woman who had twin boys six and a half years old; a little girl four, and a baby boy two. She always brought all of the children to the shop with her because she had no one to stay with them. And they always left the shop looking like a cyclone had struck it.

Today Mrs. Higgins' large brood was feeling in high spirits. The twins began to pull down all the pajamas off the lower shelf crying, "Mommy, buy me this, buy me that!"

Mitzy, the four year old, had opened the sliding door of the glass case where the baby shoes were and had out a half dozen pair before Terri could stop her.

Mrs. Higgins yelled at them but they didn't pay the least attention to her.

"I wanted to buy them some fall snow suits," she complained in a tired voice, "but how can I select anything with them acting the way they do!"

Poor Mrs. Higgins looked as though she was ready to burst into tears of embarrassment because of the outrageous behavior of her offsprings.

Terri spoke softly to the twins. Then she went into the back room and brought out a big bright colored story book she kept to amuse restless youngsters while their mothers shopped.

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THE TWINS were delighted. They began to pull at Terri and with Mitzy, their sister's help, they landed Terri in a chair and began to climb all over her.

"Read us a story, Terri! Read us a story!" they all cried at once.

Terri laughed and said, "Okay, Mrs. Higgins, while you're deciding on the snow suits. I'll read to the children."

So Terri began to read the stories in the big book with all kind of facial expressions. The twins screamed with laughter. Every time Terri would make a funny face, they'd cry, "Do it again, Terri!" And Terri would patiently repeat it.

Finally Mrs. Higgins made her selection and left with the children still clinging to Terri and begging her to come and see them.

Then just as the door closed behind Mrs. Higgins, it opened again and a man with wide shoulders and deep blue eyes walked into the Tiny Tot Shop. Terri stared at him as if he were a mirage.

"Scott!" she cried in breathless surprise.

Scott walked over to face her directly across the counter.

"After witnessing that scene with you and that bunch of kids through the window, I'm convinced that, as the old saying goes, there's something rotten in Denmark.

"Terri, Cleo told me you quit working in the Tiny Tot Shop because you hated children, because they got on your nerves. I didn't want to believe her but I couldn't forget the way you acted that day beside the swimming pool when the boys splashed you. You seemed so irritated and then when I wanted you to tell them a story by the camp fire, the idea seemed to repulse you. So since there was so much to back up Cleo's accusation, I decided it was best if we didn't get married.

"You see, Terri, it's dreadfully important to me that the girl I marry is fond of children. Not only because of the organization at Palm Lane but because I have a seven year old son of my own. I was going to tell you about him before we were married. My wife died when he was an infant and he is staying with his grandmother. I didn't bring him out to Palm Lane because I didn't want to break into his school term. He's coming out at the end of school.

"I was walking by the shop a while ago and I couldn't resist looking through the window. And, Terri, no person who hates youngsters could have been as gentle and appealing with them as you were just now!"

Suddenly Terri was crying and laughing at the same moment. A kind of wild hysteria had taken possession of her.

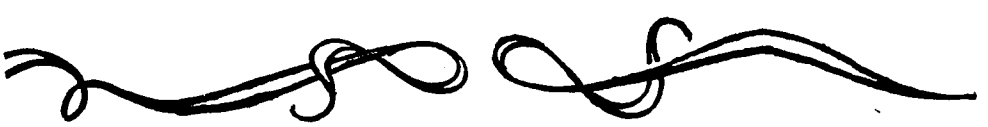
"Oh, Scott," she cried, "I almost lost you as a result of trying so hard to make you notice me!"

Then between tears and laughter, Terri was telling him the reason she had resented the splashing water that day, the reason she had turned the children's toggery shop over to Cleo.

When she had finished Scott rebuked her gently. "Darling, didn't you know that I would have loved you no matter what you were like? Love like ours doesn't just happen accidentally. It is written in the stars!"

Then he kissed her and Terri knew that he was right. She knew she would never have to deceive Scott again. Betwen them would always be perfect understanding, perfect happiness.

THE END



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Now was the time to cajole, while he was still under the spell of their kisses.

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Love Is For Night Owls

A Fascinating Novelette

Rowena wrote what she thought was an amusing story about a playboy; she said she'd like to see him stranded on a desert island dressed in leopard skin. Well . . he decided to accommodate her!

ROWENA looked at her watch. She was already twenty minutes late getting to the airport. Deems would be jittering all over the place for he hated to be kept waiting. Keeping people waiting was a special privilege he reserved for himself, she recalled with a dry smile. She leaned forward and spoke to the taxi driver.

"Can't we go a little faster?"

"Not if you want to get there all in one piece, lady," he replied tersely.

What a vacation! Rowena thought, eyeing her too-thin face in the mirror of her compact while she deepened the rouge on her full, wearily drooping lips.

The doctor had ordered her to slow down; take a rest. He said if she kept on at the pace she was going she would land in a sanitarium with a nervous breakdown. Running a gossip column in a New York daily wasn't the duck soup she had once thought it would be.

You couldn't give out the kind of dope the subscribers wanted to read about the Big Names of the stage, screen and society unless you went where the Big Names went, and stuck around long enough to see and hear things. And if you did all that you didn't get home until morning, when it was time to organize your notes, write your column and make that infernal deadline!

And the boss' idea of a "complete rest" was to send her on an assignment in Brazil, to cover the human interest angles of a Pan-American Conference of Big Wigs. Deems Endicott, the "Flying Reporter" was to get the legal and technical details.

"It'll be a nice change for you, Row," he had seconded the city editor's argument. "Warm climate, no late nights. And Susan Thompson can take over your column while you are away."

It was Sue's fault that Rowena was late getting started. She came over at eight in the morning and asked a steady stream of questions until ten-thirty. And when she finally had gone Rowena still had to pack, and leave a note for the milkman, and there hadn't been time even to grab

by **Mid Hathaway**

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a bite of lunch before taking a cab to the airport.

Deems was already in the front cockpit of his speedy little hydroplane, as she had known he would be. She gave the taxi driver an extra fifty cents for carrying her bags over to the plane for her. Deems wasn't even gentleman enough to get out and help with loading the luggage and his passenger.

Without as much as a glance in her direction he mumbled, "About time," when she settled herself with a sigh in the rear cockpit. And the next instant they were taking off across the water of the bay.

As they zoomed neatly around and headed south, Rowena found herself relaxing and staring dreamily at the back of Deems' helmet, and wondering why she went on loving him. He wasn't particularly good looking and she couldn't think of anything about him she really approved of. He was a climber, all right, but he'd rather climb on someone else's bandwagon than his own.

OFTEN he would say to Rowena, with that cynical air of his, "It isn't what you know that counts; it's who you know."

"Whom you know," she would correct him absently.

"Who or whom, you get what I mean. You've got to travel with the right people if you want to get ahead in this world. I'm going to spend my time getting some connections that'll do me some good."

That was the way he had spent last night—getting connections. He had managed to drag down an invite to a deb's coming out party. Of course Gloria would expect a very pretty account on the Globe's Society Page as a result, but you'd think to listen to Deems that the deb liked him because of the way his dark hair curled over his left eyebrow.

Maybe he would snap out of his present grouch if she pretended to be interested. She said lightly: "Have a nice time last night, Deems?"

"Charming," came the prompt answer, "but I don't happen to be Deems."

Rowena gasped and stared harder at the rear view of that brown helmet in front of her. It did come up higher in the seat than Deems' usually did, now that she noticed....

"Then who in the devil are you?" she demanded sharply. "This is his plane and we're supposed to be on our way to an assignment in Brazil."

He didn't answer her question directly. Instead he stated with a cool casualness: "Deems Endicott is on his way to cover that assignment, all right. I myself saw him leave in my own plane, a few minutes before you arrived. It didn't cost me too much to persuade him he could handle it all very well without your help, Rowena McFarland."

Rowena's thoughts were darting this way and that, like a mouse trapped in a hopeless maze. This was some kind of dastardly plot, but what? And who was back of it? What reason could there be for stopping her from going to this Conference? If spy work was behind it, the blow would be struck against Deems, not the gossip columnist....

She said aloud, "Kidnapping me couldn't possibly benefit anyone."

A short laugh answered her. "Most of the junk you write benefits no one except—possibly—you. I suppose you are paid a salary for your muckraking." The bitter undertone behind his words struck out at her, startled her.

So that was it! This was somebody's idea of revenge for something she had written about him. Deems had warned her. He had said repeatedly:

"Some day somebody will decide not to take those biting insults of yours. They'll get you, you can bet on it."

She bit her full under lip at the thought of Deems. Deems, whom she had loved so much it was a hollow ache, 'way down deep inside her, had sold her out. He had let her in for this, deliberately, for a price. She knew he was money crazy and fame crazy. She knew he didn't love her as much as she loved him. But

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she hadn't known he would sell her out to the highest bidder, to any no-account celebrity who happened to want revenge.

Her gray eyes bored into the broad back which was all she'd seen of her pilot. Who could he be? He must be a celebrity, because celebrities were all Rowena wrote about. And, of course, he was stuffed with money or he wouldn't be able to own airplanes and buy off two-timing reporters.

"You'll have to land sometime," she told her kidnapper cynically. "I can wait until then to find out who you are."

"There's no need for that," his suave voice reassured her. "I'll be happy to introduce myself. I'm the 'Luxury Lover' you so enjoy daydreaming about. The one you like to visualize stranded on a desert island —'the epitome of helplessness.'"

ROWENA gasped. Rutherford L. Sylveston, III! She recalled with growing alarm the day she had included the sarcastic bit about him in her column. She'd been sick the night before. Unable to make the rounds of the night spots, she had relied on her notebook, making up her column from the ever-reliable list of "personal impressions about celebrities." She was trying to remember what else she had said about him, when he helped her out by remarking:

"I decided not to stay in the 'Champagne bucket'—where you so neatly consigned me. I decided it might be a good idea to take you some place where we wouldn't be disturbed, and feed you some of your own sharp-pointed words, in generous, unseasoned portions."

She clenched her fists in hard little knots and told herself Rutherford Sylveston was much too civilized to do anything really desperate.

"Where is this undisturbed place you're taking me?" she asked with a semblance of calm.

"If my course is charted correctly, we will land before dark on an island which at present is uninhabited. I've been assured it lacks all the conveniences of home. Coconuts will serve the main course of every meal. We may be able to rake up some dried leaves for a bed. And I've even brought along a pair of leopard skins to add the proper local color to Mr. and Mrs. Tarzan. You mentioned a desire to see how I'd look in a leopard skin, remember? Well, I have the same curiosity about you."

She swallowed hard. "You've thought of everything, haven't you?" she asked in a tight voice.

"Well, nearly everything. I may have overlooked a few minor points, such as inquiring about the wild animals inhabiting the jungles. But I'll be there to protect you. With

my trusty bow and arrow I'll shoot down any savage creatures that try to molest you."

She made one more try for sanity. "Just because you are Rutherford L. Sylveston, Third, that doesn't put you out of reach of the long arm of the law. You're not going to get away with this, you know."

Her threatening tone didn't seem to make much impression on him. His shrug was careless. "I can try," he stated blandly.

"What do you want?" she cried. "If it's a public apology for hurt-

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ing your feelings, all right. Turn back now and I'll let you dictate any retraction you like and it'll appear in all the papers, including my own column!"

She saw his head shake stubbornly. "Neither threats nor bribes are going to do you any good, so you might as well relax and enjoy the scenery. You wanted a vacation and your paper sent you chasing more celebrities instead. Well, you're going to get your vacation, at my expense. And the only celebrity within a thousand miles will be yours truly. I promise not to remind you of my social status oftener than three times a day."

"Thanks, too much," she said bitingly, and lapsed into a sultry silence during which her mind alternately fumed and groped for a possible escape.

"I could bail out," she remembered at last, looking down at the rippling water below.

"Yes, you could," he agreed. "But I wouldn't advise it. The water's still pretty cold in this area and the chance of a boat picking you up before you either freeze or drown is remote."

She gritted her teeth and spent the next five minutes thinking up synonyms for "hate." She had just gotten to the "l's" and was saying "loathe" to herself and glaring at her abductor's back, when he said:

"Are you hungry? I've got a candy bar here I could divide with you."

She realized with a start that she hadn't had time for either breakfast or lunch. Maybe part of that hollow feeling was due to just plain hunger.

"I'm starved," she admitted, "but not for candy."

"Sorry I can't offer you caviar canapes from the Stork Club. Better compromise on the chocolate bar. It may be the last civilized food you'll see for a long time. From now on our diet will consist principally of coconuts."

Grudgingly she accepted the piece of chocolate he handed back to her. She nibbled at it and wondered how long he would attempt to carry out his bluff. Because it was just a bluff, she knew. It was meant to frighten her; make her "eat crow" and beg for mercy. But she wouldn't. She'd been over too many rough spots in her newspaper career to scare easily. She could take any kind of punishment he could offer. She was calling his bluff, definitely.

Chapter Two

HER HUNGER partially appeased by the chocolate, and her fears calmed by her self reassurances, Rowena felt drowsy. She could hardly remember when she'd had more than five hours' sleep a day; and now, suddenly, the end of endurance had been reached. She took off her flying helmet, curled up in the seat like a cocoon, and went promptly to sleep.

The plane was bouncing along over the water when she awakened. And the next thing she knew they were gliding up a hard, white, sand-packed beach.

"Here we are," Rutherford announced, taxiing the plane about and bringing it to a stop. He climbed out and extended a hand to help her down but she ignored him.

She was looking at the wild, untamed profusion of tropical jungle which receded back from the beach. It wasn't quite dark yet. A thin slice of red sun was still showing above water in the direction she supposed was west. But to the east it looked dark and forbidding among the thicket of trees and vines on the island—if this were an island. Rowena sat there rubbing some life back into her arm that was still asleep, and she stared first at her strange surroundings, and then at the even stranger man who had abducted her.

"Come on, I can't stand here all night waiting to help you out," he said.

"I don't want to get out," she answered sullenly. "I prefer it here."

"Just as you say," he conceded, unloading his own luggage and

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striding off into the underbrush with it.

Rowena sat there and contemplated the helplessness of her situation and got madder by the minute. Who would ever have thought that this sleek, polite, mild-mannered gentleman of cafe society would turn overnight into a veritable caveman who kidnapped people just for the sport of it.

Yet here she was, only heaven knew where—and from all indications he was prepared to make a night of it. As for Deems and his treachery—that wouldn't bear thinking about at all. She would just have to file him away in her mind for future reference.

And the longer she sat here thinking, the more cramped and achy her muscles became from sitting in one position so long. She realized reluctantly that she might as well climb out now as later. She didn't seem to be spiting anyone but herself by refusing to budge.

She climbed out and stretched. Opened her purse, took out a comb and ran it negligently through her short brown hair. Then she looked at herself in her mirror. Her face was a mess. Lipstick smeared into a clownish grin at one side of her mouth, a dark smudge under her left eye, nose so shiny it looked as though it had never met a powder puff.

More for something to do than because she really cared, she set about repairing the damage. Cleansing her face with astringent cleansing pads, applying foundation cream which she had managed to dig out of the makeup kit in her suitcase, adding new powder, rouge, mascara. She was just brushing off the excess powder when her captor returned.

SHE stared at him in amazement for a moment, and then she had to laugh. He had shed all his clothes, replacing them with the motion picture conception of the caveman's leopard skin, loosely slung over the left shoulder and curving down to the waist on the other side.

"You go in for realism, don't you, Tarzan?"

"Ugh," he emitted gutturally.

She shook her head. "Wrong. Only Indians say 'ugh'. Keep your periods straight."

"You're out of yours, too," he countered. "Where's your sarong? Your hair's too short. And that make-up kit looks much too Fifth Avenue for the jungle."

She arched a carefully shaped eyebrow at him. "This is your show. I'm only an unwilling spectator," she reminded him.

"All right, see if you can be an unwilling firewood gatherer," he suggested, scooping up a handful of leaves and heaping them on the beach. "It gets chilly down here nights."

"If you put on some clothes you won't be so chilly," she commented, making no move to obey his request.

He didn't urge her. He brought in the deadwood without assistance and made a fairly commendable Boy Scout fire. Seating his rugged form cross-legged in front of it, he broke open a coconut and began munching it with apparent relish.

Rowena sat on her suitcase and watched him with mingled amusement and rage.

"Well, how do you like it?" he asked, looking up at her over the second coconut.

"Like what?"

"Your dream. Don't you remember? You wrote, for half a million readers to read and smirk over, that you liked to imagine what I would look like wearing a leopard skin and munching a coconut. Well, now you see. Are you satisfied?"

"Perfectly. Can we go home now?" she asked hopefully. Her hunger was back, and it was gnawing at her insides harder than ever. But she wasn't going to stoop to asking for a silly old coconut....

"What's the matter, can't you take it?"

"I can, but I'd rather not. Please, haven't you played this absurd record long enough? Let's agree I'm a worm and I should never be allowed to set digit to typewriter key again. But meanwhile, let's be head-

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ing north." In spite of her attempt at nonchalance, a pleading note crept into her voice.

He was shaking his head solemnly. "I'm sorry but it's impossible to oblige the lady. I had just enough gas to make the trip down; none to fly back on."

Rowena didn't believe him but she decided not to tell him so. Neither did she tell him that she knew how to fly a plane and had flown this one on trips with Deems more times than she could count. She crossed her fingers and fervently prayed that there were as many things about her that Rutherford didn't know, as there were things about him that she was just learning. His capacity for coconuts, for one thing.

"BETTER weaken and have some of this delicious coconut brille, with Spanish rum sauce," he invited genially, cracking another woody shell with a rock.

"Thank you, no," she refused. "The only way I relish coconut is shredded, in cream pie, with the accent on the cream and pie."

"Tsk, tsk. How urban! No South Sea Island upbringing at all. What right have you to criticize young men from Manhattan who like their suits tailored and their food prepared by chefs?"

"No right at all. I've admitted that. I'll go even further—it's a helluva way to earn a living, poking fun at comparatively harmless butterflies and moths. But it seems to be the only thing I've found to do that will pay the rent on an apartment I'm fond of, and provide some jelly for my daily bread. Now that we are in perfect accord on that one subject, let's skip it, shall we? If I can find anything around here that will serve as my boudoir, I think I'll retire."

As she stood up and looked away from the fire toward the jungle, she let out an ear-piercing shriek. Four pairs of glassy eyes were glaring at her from the trees, reflecting the light from the blazing fire.

Rutherford jumped up, his glance following hers. "Try not to act so excited," he warned in a low, tense voice. "I was kidding about the trusty bow and arrow. I haven't a thing to fight them with but my bare hands. We can only hope they are afraid of the fire and will keep their distance as long as it continues to blaze."

"Wh-what are they?" she whispered.

"Your guess is as good as mine. Some one of the wildcat family, probably."

She shuddered, and bit her lip to stop its trembling. "I'll get even with you for this, Rutherford Sylveston, if it's the last thing I ever do," she said—but she said it to herself, not loud enough for him to hear.

She tried not to look toward the thicket after that. If more cats' eyes appeared there she preferred not to know about them. She was going to climb into the plane to sleep but Rutherford insisted that the "bed of leaves" referred to in her column would be more comfortable.

He fixed it for her, and laid some blankets on top for good measure.

"I'll stay awake to tend the fire," he promised chivalrously.

"All right, I'll change places with you later," she offered, "although I can't see why I should. I didn't ask to be brought here. And at this hour in New York, the evening would barely have started for you, wouldn't it?"

"It's the gasless air," he yawned. "It gets the stoutest night owl."

"I'm a night owl, too," she insisted stoutly.

Ironically enough, he was the first asleep. Rowena tiptoed around the fire and leaned quite close to him to be sure he was not playing possum. She noted with a start how really good looking he was. The shoulders of his tailored coat had not been padded, as she'd once suspected. His own shoulders were every bit as wide now, the whole broad, evenly browned expanse of them. A lock of his soft black hair had fallen across his high forehead and she felt an almost irresistible impulse to reach a

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hand down and brush it back into place.

SHE'D NEVER seen his hair mussed before. She'd never seen his eyes closed, either, the lashes making shadows on his prominent cheekbones. She'd never noted what a square, stubborn jaw he had; nor what a curved, whimsical mouth.

But why was she stopping to analyze the characteristics of a man she so thoroughly despised? She could be finding out how much gas there really was in the Deems' plane...

A thorough search left her breathless, and perspiring with anxiety. He was right, the tank was very nearly empty. But still worse than that, the square tank was empty too and she couldn't find any other container hidden anywhere. She tried the radio, thinking to send a message, but he'd neatly jimmied up the set. It was deader than the League of Nations.

"Damn," she cursed softly.

"Yes?" said a sleepy voice. "If you're awake you can take over now. I'll throw another log on the fire." He didn't seem a bit surprised to see her climbing out of the plane. "No, there really isn't any gas, nor any radio either," he said mildly.

"And how do you propose to get away from here after you're through with all the horse play?"

"You can make me a distress signal flag from your best white taffeta petticoat and I'll hang it from the highest tree on the highest hill."

She sniffed. "The only petticoat I happen to have with me is green. The color of the leaves, you know. It wouldn't flag down a sparrow, much less a high flying airplane bent on business of its own."

"How thoughtless of you," he sighed. "You should always start out on adventures armed for any emergency. But since you didn't, we'll have to resign ourselves to our fate, or at least postpone further worries until tomorrow. Good night." He rolled himself up in a blanket and went promptly back to sleep.

Rowena sat huddled in front of the fire with a shawl hugged closely around her, and she grew more hungry and lonely and miserable by the second. She began weeping forlornly, not even bothering to wipe away the streaming tears.

This was the kind of thing that only happened in books, she told herself miserably, and yet it was actually happening to her. Here she was, stranded in some God-forsaken place in the middle of the night with an idiotic glamor boy she'd never spoken to more than a half dozen times in her life before today. Her weeping increased, punctuated by a sob now and then.

It must have been one of the sobs that awakened Rutherford.

"Oh, I say, don't take it that hard," he urged contritely, coming around the fire to sit down beside her. "Did anything frighten you?" he asked, patting her shoulder awkwardly.

"No — everything's — too-too — ducky," she jerked out between sobs. "I'm — only — starving — by degrees, but that's—all right. Go on back to sleep, you big lummox!"

"Oh, I'm so sorry. That's too bad. Wait here," he directed, just as though she had any choice in the matter.

HE WENT over to a fringe of bushes and pulled out a suitcase which he brought back to the

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edge of the fire with him. Opened, it revealed four solid rows of cans and packages such as are displayed on any grocer's shelves.

"What would you like?" he asked cordially. "We have some very nice beans here."

She glared, first at the canned goods, then at her captor. "You inhuman brute," she cried. "You'd let me starve to death while you pretend to be satisfied with coconuts. If I wasn't so darn weak I'd kill you!"

"How?" he asked with an amused grin, his eyes roving over her slender form. "And who would you get to help you?"

"Never mind that. Pass the beans, if you really mean for me to have some. If not, get them out of my sight."

He insisted on keeping her waiting while he warmed the beans in a frying pan which he miraculously produced from another compartment of the case. He even had paper plates and forks for serving.

"You think of everything, don't you?" she mumbled between gulps. "I suppose it wouldn't be sporting at this point to remind you that Tarzan never heard of a can opener."

"There are a lot of things that bird missed," he replied, helping himself to a second portion of beans.

Never had anything tasted so good. When the last morsel had been scraped up and the paper plates had been consigned to the flames, Rowena sighed and felt as though maybe her world hadn't come to an end after all. She even smiled a little at the big brute in the ridiculous leopard skin costume and thought what a good motion picture this would make.

She said so to Tarzan, with a short laugh. "I feel like something out of a Paramount movie thriller..."

And then she noticed a certain, glowing, almost frightening look in his eyes and her heart speeded up perceptibly.

"In the movies, at this point, Tarzan would be learning something about kisses," he told her, "and I don't think that such a bad idea."

"Oh, yes it is! A very bad idea!" she protested, moving away from him, but he was too swift for her.

His arms were around her and she was fighting and clawing like a tigress at the exposed, naked expanse of shoulders and chest. Until he caught her hands and pinned them behind her in one of his. The other arm held her firmly, and then he was kissing her—rapidly, at first, as though to get all he could before she freed herself. But as the fight seemed to die out of her, his kisses slowed.

By all rules and reasons, she should be scared to death, Rowena thought crazily. And even more than fear she should be filled with fury at this final insult. But, wierdly, all other feeling gradually gave way to a wild upsurge of exultation. She'd been kissed before, dozens of times, but she'd never felt like this.

Rutherford's lips grew warmer, more tender as they came back to hers again and again as though savoring a rare, delicious wine. They paused at last before lifting, and brushed back and forth in a final caress that was gentle and, at the same time, flame igniting.

"Rowena," he said dreamily, a world of yearning and apology in his voice. "I was insane to bring you here like this, but I'll never be sorry. Never!"

NOW WAS the time to cajole, while he was still under the spell of their kisses.

"You must have made some arrangement to get me away from here just as you supplied yourself with plenty of food to last for days. Can we leave, as soon as the sun's up?"

"No," he said shortly, his face hardening. "We won't leave until I'm good and ready. And the way I feel right now I won't be ready to leave for two weeks at least. If you think you can vamp me out of my original intentions, you're crazy."

Her momentary attraction towards him ebbed away, reverting to her former rage and hatred. She swung

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out one slender arm and struck him a stinging blow across his handsome set face. "Then take that," she snapped indignantly, "and that and... "

Before the third slap he had imprisoned her hands once more. "You little spitfire," he gritted savagely, "I'll tame you if it's the last thing I do. You take this. And this! And THIS!" he said, and accompanied the words with kisses that infuriated, and stung, and drove her slightly mad all at one and the same time.

He had pulled her up into his arms. Like a bundle of straw he carried her over to the bed of leaves and dumped her unceremoniously into the middle of them.

"Now go to sleep," he ordered. "I'll call you for breakfast."

Chapter Three

FOR TWO days they maintained a sort of armed truce. The kidnapper had discovered an effective weapon for bending his captive to do his bidding. When she started calling him "Rutherford" in a tone of voice that made it sound like "Archibald" or "Percival," he informed her that he had always hated his name and that his friends called him simply "Rute."

"I'm not your friend, Rutherford," she came back coldly.

"Nevertheless, you'll call me 'Rute' or get yourself thoroughly kissed for every time you say 'Rutherford' or 'Tarzan.'"

So Rowena called him 'Rute,' but she made the word sound like something she'd enjoy grinding under her heel.

She also prepared and fried the rabbits and fish that he managed to bring in. She didn't know quite why, but she got a peverse satisfaction out of pointing her miniature camera at him and snapping pictures when he was unaware of her intention. The only times her first night's fears returned were the occasions when he moved out of sight into the forest. Sometimes he was gone for hours.

"Take me with you," she begged. "I don't want to be left here. Some of those wildcats, or whatever they were, might come back and molest me."

"You keep the fire going and they won't," he assured her. "You'd just be in my way. A woman's place is in the home," he recited amusedly.

She started to protest but she saw that I'm-going-to-kiss-you look in his eyes and thought better of it.

It was the third day when she discovered the "eye."

She had been picking up sticks to put on the fire when she caught sight of an oval, glassy looking thing that resembled an enormous thumb tack. She picked it up and examined it closely, a perplexed frown drawing her brows together. It had been lying by the trunk of a tree, as though it had fallen there.

Rowena pushed the pointed end of the thing into the tree trunk and back up to where she had been standing the first night when the four pairs of eyes had glared at her. The sun was setting now, and—sure enough—this oval of glass caught and reflected the slanting rays, looking exactly like a single, menacing cat's eye. She recalled signs along U. S. Highway that shone only at night when the beam from your headlights struck them...

Her mouth straightened out into a cynical line as she speculated over what other tricks "Rute" might have pulled. Where did he go when he was away so long every afternoon? What island was this, anyhow? Was it really uninhabited? Or did only this one corner of it have that deserted appearance? Maybe there were club-houses, hotels, cottages and other marks of civilization on the other side.

There didn't seem to be any path leading back through the woods, but maybe there was a path that didn't start right at the edge of the thicket. It was too late this evening, but tomorrow she would do more investigating.

She dropped the glass thumb tack into her sweater pocket and began calmly stirring up pan biscuits for supper. When Rute returned she

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tried to hide from him her rapidly mounting excitement.

She was sweet that night. She exerted all her charm on being pleasant and likeable and friendly. She led Rute on to talk about himself, his childhood, his hobbies, his dreams. She was surprised to learn that he hadn't always been wealthy. Grandfather Sylveston had disowned Sylveston the Second for refusing to settle down in business, and also for marrying Rute's mother. He had tied up the fortune so that none of it could be used until Rute was entering high school. Then a trust fund was to take care of the boy's education, but to supply no luxuries.

WHEN RUTE was twenty-one he inherited everything. Grandfather Sylveston had died the year before, completely satisfied that Sylveston the Third was a lad after his own heart. He would step in and run the aluminum company as its founder would want it run.

"But you didn't, did you?" Rowena cut in pointedly. "Your grandfather would be no end disappointed in you if he could see what a worthless playboy you turned out to be, wouldn't he?"

He didn't answer at once, and when he did his voice was harsh with bitterness. "I hope that he can see me, from wherever his stingy soul went when he died! He broke my father's heart—and my mother's, too, just because they couldn't be fitted into the arbitrary mold he'd set up for them. Dad loved the outdoors, and working with plants and animals. He would have been miserable cooped up in an office, adding long columns of figures—which was the way Granddad wanted him to start his career.

"Well, when I got old enough to play politics, I played 'em on the old gentleman for all I was worth, because I knew that was the only way to get him to will his money unconditionally to me. And it worked. What a sucker he was!" His voice broke a little, as he added:

"I wanted to use the money to buy my mother all the things she had always craved and could never have. But she didn't live long enough. And six months later Dad followed her. His own father didn't even unbend long enough to come to his son's funeral... "

"That must have been tough to take," Rowena murmured, and looked up at his whitened face with a sort of dawning understanding. "And when the old gentleman passed on you thought you'd get even with him by being everything he would have hated?"

"Partly that and partly because I'd come to hate the very sound of the word 'aluminum.' And I'd never had much fun either, so I figured I was entitled to a little. Mother and Dad always had such a struggle to get by, I decided to have fun for them, as well as for myself. I've been fairly wallowing in ease and luxury for four years now," he mused with a crooked grin.

"Don't you ever get slightly fed up?"

"Maybe. But not enough to decide to settle down and be a big aluminum magnate. Why should I spend eight hours a day figuring up ways to earn more dough, when my income's already so large I can't spend the interest as fast as it accumulates?"

She pondered over that. And he watched the firelight playing over her sensitive, thoughtful features.

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"If you've got more than you want, you might give someone who really needs it a chance to use some of it. Oh, I don't mean charity," she rushed on when he would have interrupted her. "Our country's become too dependent on charity the past few years as it is. But, thank goodness, there are still some fine, worthwhile people who have their share of pride.

"A LOT OF them have ideas, too. And at one time they could have borrowed money from the bank to finance those ideas until they started paying out. But not any more. And anyone they can get to back them would want too big a slice of the profits.

"Take my own dad, for instance. He's been a chemist for years. And when I was just a child I had whooping cough so badly I nearly died. Dad formulated a cough remedy that saved my life. Then he got it patented, and everyone he interested in it wanted to take it away from him and give him practically nothing in return. So he makes the medicine for our friends, free of charge. While, if he had the proper backing, he could provide not only hundreds of jobs for the unemployed, but a worthwhile product for the customers."

A hard glint had come into Rute's eyes while she talked. When she had finished, he stood up abruptly. "I thought all this was leading up to some kind of phony proposition," he said with a short, ugly laugh. "Lady, let me tell you, I've been propositioned by experts. Every cheap chiseler from a Broadway playwright to the corner bootblack has been after me to 'angel' one fool thing or another. But it's no dice. I may not be worth my salt as a financial wizard, but I can still add two and two..."

She had stood up too, after his first half dozen words. Now she cut in on his denunciation with an anger that matched his own: "You and your low suspicious mind! I'm not asking you for anything! I'd die first. You can take your confounded money and jump in the ocean with it, for all I care. I didn't mean I wanted you to give Dad money. He wouldn't take it if you offered it to him.

"But I was just mentioning his cough medicine as an example of the kind of investment you COULD use your surplus cash for, and do the world some good. Not that you want to do the world any good. Nor yourself either. I'm sorry I thought for a minute you were almost human. Good night!"

Whirling away from him she strode over to the pile of leaves and blankets she had come to think of as "bed."

Chapter Four

RUTE WAS nowhere in sight when she awakened that morning at sun-up. Her first thoughts were of how hateful and despicable he was. Her second were to remember the phosphorescent thumb tack and the fact that today she planned to manage a little more secret investigating of the island.

After making some coffee and washing down a couple of rye crackers with it, she decided not to wait for Rute to come back so that she could be sure where he was and that

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he wouldn't interrupt. She would start right now looking for the trail she suspected might lead to some definite signs of civilizations. A lipstick could serve to mark the trees so that, if necessary, she could trace her way back to camp.

She had started out in two directions without getting anywhere but into a hopeless tangle of vines and bushes. And yet she was sure there must be a path here somewhere, because Rute was always disappearing into the woods and coming back hours later. He had no axe and had blazed no new trail.

Suddenly her foot struck against something as she kicked away the dried leaves. Down she went on all fours and began digging like a puppy looking for a hidden bone. Presently she let out a yelp of amazement.

There was some kind of box buried here in the soft humid earth. She dug faster and unearthed another, and still another. In the center of each had been planted intertwined thorny bushes, such as might have been calculated to discourage any efforts like her present one to locate a trail.

"But I was just mentioning his thorny bushes, such as might have been calculated to discourage any efforts like her present one to locate a trail.

It didn't take long after that to discover a section where the heavy vines were just as obviously a recent addition to the natural scenery. Unlike the vines that had really grown here, these could be pushed aside like the curtains on a stage. And after skirting a few more thorny bushes and parting another viny curtain or two, you came onto a path that could have been lifted bodily from the Blue Bird play.

Rowena laughed exultantly as she ran along this path. In her mind she tried to figure how much it must have cost Rute to plan and carry out this enormous h o a x. You wouldn't think that mere revenge against one wise-cracking columnist would be worth it, would you?—she asked herself dryly.

And then she recalled how furious she was at him, and her anger grew larger. He wouldn't invest a few dollars that would bring big returns in aiding humanity and would repay him at the same time. Oh, no. But he would waste thousands of dollars making a few square rods of ocean front look like an impenetrable jumble—just so he could trick a working girl who hadn't really harmed him at all.

"I hate him," she gasped out as she ran along through a woods no denser than a government forest preserve full of hikers' trails. "I hate him, hate him, hate him."

Just as she had expected, she eventually came to a wide clearing, and a cluster of buildings. But this was no clubhouse, nor hotel. No commercial camping ground at all.

Instead there was a sprawling rustic cottage, encircled by a wide, screened-in porch. There was a tool shed, a sort of barn, and a pen that might have been used for chickens once, but was now rusted and full of holes.

The lawn had once been carefully tended, too. But now the grass and weeds and flowers were running riot. The flagstone walk was almost completely hidden in the tall grass.

UNCONSCIOUSLY Rowena slowed her steps and tip-toed silently over to the side of the house, where she could look through an open window. What she saw there was even more startling than anything discovered up to now.

Rute was sitting before a desk, talking into a telephone, or a microphone, she couldn't be sure which, due to the comparative gloom inside the building. But whichever it was his words came to her clearly.

"Yes, I know, I told you to wait until the end of the week to rescue us, but this dame has gotten in my hair. I've had my fun and now I'm ready to quit and come home."

There was some argument at the other end of the line, for presently Rute's voice broke out impatiently:

"I've already explained why I'm not going around the bend to the boat-house and get gas. Rowena

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thinks we are really stranded on a desert isle. Am I going to spoil all the trouble I've gone to, by miraculously showing up, tugging a can of gas? She knows there's no extra supply in the plane. She searched thoroughly for it the very first night.

"So you've simply got to start out for some destination east of Florida, see our campfire and come down for us. The story's going to make all the headlines. And it's going to make our heroine look pretty sappy—I hope!" He laughed cynically, but Rowena didn't wait to hear more.

She fled down that path so fast that she stumbled and fell twice, tore her hosiery, and scratched her elbows. But none of that was important. The important thing was to find a boathouse, and some gas, and take off before Mister Smarty got through laughing over what a fool he was making of her.

She had pointed the nose of the plane in the direction the compass told her was northwest before she took a second to glance down over her right shoulder and smile grimly.

There stood a 1941 Robinson Crusoe, on an island beach, by a dying camp-fire. He was waving both arms skyward and shouting.

Rowena waved back gaily and threw him a kiss, just for luck.

She flew into New York in time for cocktails, only she was going to be too busy to stop for cocktails. She was going to give some stories to the papers, all right, but they weren't going to be along the lines anticipated by her erstwhile captor.

Chapter Five

ROWENA'S own paper, the Globe, shoved the Korean war news over on page two to make room for her story. It was headed:

GIRL COLUMNIST KIDNAPED BY HEIR

It went on to explain:

"The fact that Cafe Society Playboys can't take ribbing was brought home forcibly to our own Broadway columnist, Rowena MacFarland, Tuesday. The aluminum heir, Rutherford Sylveston, III, had been extremely annoyed at Rowena for saying — via her column — that she couldn't imagine anything more helpless than Rutherford, shipwrecked on a desert isle.

"He was so annoyed, in fact, that he borrowed a plane to kidnap her and prove what a rugged individual he is.

"The 'desert island' he took her to is a small island off the coast of Florida, owned by the heir himself, His idea of 'roughing it' proved to be a ten-room rustic lodge, with hot and cold running water, and a bath adjoining every bedroom.

"The first day out, Rutherford looked very picturesque in his leopard skin sarong, but after that he seemed to feel that Palm Beach flannels were informal enough.

"To show what a brave hunter he was, he stalked to its lair a poor defenseless baby rabbit, and caught a fish that had only recently changed its name from 'minnow.'

"When he contrived this dastardly kidnapping plot, it was with the intention of staying shipwrecked at least a week before his cohorts would fly to the rescue. But after the third day, the 'rugged individual' was missing his valet and Broadway's bright lights so desperately that he radioed an SOS from prompt delivery from his self imposed exile.

"His co-conspirator pointed out that there was an ample supply of gas in the boathouse around the bend from where he had landed the plane.

"Our brave hero protested violently:

"'I'm to carry gas from the boathouse? Don't be silly. You fly right down here and carry it for me. What am I paying you a salary for if I've got to fetch gasoline cans like any filling station mechanic?'

"While he was thus babbling hysterically, Rowena was filling the plane with gas and taking off for home, leaving the brave kidnapper helplessly stranded on his island in

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the Atlantic.

"When asked if she intended to start suit against her erstwhile kidnapper, Rowena laughed gaily: 'For what? A lot of good laughs? If you ever find anything funnier than a cafe society dilettante trying to act like a he-man son of the soil, show me. But I don't believe you can do it.'"

* * *

On the same page with the story were three of the pictures Rowena had taken with her miniature camera when Rute wasn't looking; one in the leopard skin, one in flannels, one with his "catch of fish," which carried the caption. "You should have seen the one that got away!"

WITH GRIM satisfaction she cut the story and pictures and put them among her souvenirs. So you were going to make a fool of me, were you?—she addressed the newsprint resemblance of Sylveston. We'll see who's made a fool of—now!

But her heart turned over when she remembered the wistful little boy look of him when he was telling about his childhood, and the struggle his parents had had. It quickened oddly when she remembered his kisses that first night—kisses that had never been repeated.

He's a gentleman, she admitted to herself reluctantly. He could have taken unfair advantage of me, and I'd have had one heck of a time stopping him. But he didn't. He was pretty decent the whole time—probably more decent than I deserved.

Of course it had hurt to be accused of trying to chisel a slice of his money. And it didn't please her vanity to hear him telling his would-be rescuer that she got in his hair...

She must remember only these unfavorable things, she decided, and forget all the things about him she could have liked, if circumstances had been different.

It wasn't as easy as all that, she soon discovered. Everyone she met wanted to know all about her "thrilling experiences." She wasn't home two days before she realized no one really believed she was as scornful of her kidnapper as she pretended to be. They just couldn't imagine any healthy young girl being stranded for three and a half days along with a man as handsome and rich as Rute—and not succumb.

The women would eye her with mingled envy and suspicion; the men seemed to feel she was ready for any insulting proposition they might feel like making.

Rowena took it all with her head up, her eyes flashing, her lips tight with furious resentment. And her heart was so full of hatred for Deems and Sue, who had been her friends and had sold her out for Rute's lousy cash, that there wasn't room there for any other emotion.

Or so she thought, until the night she saw Rute at the Diamond Eagle. He was very tall and debonnaire and correct in white tie and tails, and he was escorting not one Broadway cutie, but three. Each of them hung onto his every word and cooed, at appropriate intervals, "Oh, Mister Sylveston!" in shrill, impressed voices.

Rowena was with Don Westerville, who had just set a new flying record that was showering him with lime-light. Rowena wouldn't even talk to Deems now, much less go out with him, so she had to take whatever escort she could get to go the rounds with her. She swore she'd take her night life solo before going back to Deems after the way he had treated her.

Tonight she wore a trailing gold brocade gown that gracefully molded her figure, left the creamy back and shoulders bare, and made its wearer look as though she had just stepped from the pages of Vogue.

Don followed her glance to Rute's table. "Would you like to sit near them?" he asked pointedly.

"Not especially," she said stiffly, "but on the other hand I don't want him to think I consider him important enough to avoid."

SO THEY sat three tables away, with Rowena facing the aluminun heir. It didn't take very deep

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powers of perception to note that he was rapidly getting plastered. She'd never before seen him show the slightest effects of liquor. But now, each time he lifted his glass he laughed louder and talked with more animation to his enthralled guests.

Finally he spotted Rowena and immediately wove his tipsy way over to her table.

"What's my little desert rose doing, looking like a hot-house orchid?" he demanded, leering down at her.

Rowena tightened her lips and said nothing, wishing to avoid a scene, if possible. But her eyes were cold with disgust, as she tried to ignore him and devote her attention to Don.

"That's a nice number," she told him softly. "Shall we dance?"

"Yes, that's a good idea," said Rute, as though she had addressed him. "We've never danced together, have we, Rowena? There wasn't any orchestra out there. And besides we had more exciting things to do," he added with a laugh.

"You're drunk," she told him icily. "Why don't you go back to your three dolls? Maybe they appreciate drunken playboys. I don't." She turned to dance away with her escort, but Rute's hand was on her arm, swinging her roughly back to face him.

"I said you are going to dance with me," he ground out between his teeth, "if I have to push this pretty boy under the table to accomplish it."

She looked frantically from one to the other and bit her lip. "I suppose we'd better humor him," she told Don reluctantly, "or we'll all get ourselves bounced."

They danced out among the other couples—if a slow, uncertain walking backwards and forwards could be dignified by calling it "dancing."

"You pulled a fast one, didn't you?" he asked, his eyes burning down into hers with such intensity that her pulse began to hammer.

"Not any faster than the one you were trying to pull on me," she returned acidly. "The only difference is that I beat you to it. You can't quite take a fair beating, can you?" she challenged.

"What was fair about the lies you printed? Where was this ten-room lodge, with a bath adjoining every room? Who said anything about wanting a valet, or not being able to carry a can of gas?"

"I could have told a lot more that I omitted," she cut in, "about stage setting to make a harmless little island look like a wild jungle. About glass eyes pasted on trees to stare at us at night. Maybe I did add a couple of rooms and baths to the house, but I certainly heard you telling some one over the phone that you were not going to carry gas..."

His eyes narrowed, and he seemed to be thinking something over before he spoke again.

"Now, will we go back, or shall we take a lease on this part of the dance floor?" she said.

"Gladly," he said with a grin, and his steps were surprisingly steady as he marched her over to the table where the three blondes were beginning to look annoyed.

"Girls, I want you to meet my gypsy sweetheart," he introduced Rowena solemnly. "And now, I want your opinion on something. When we were marooned together, I kissed Rowena, and she kissed me back!"

She was suddenly so mad that her voice didn't sound like her own when she spoke.

"You're rotten, Rutherford Sylveston, the Third," she rasped out at him. "You're completely rotten, clear to the core. You had me fooled, for a few minutes one evening, into thinking there was something decent under that hardshelled sham of yours. I even thought that if you tried hard enough you could store away your disillusionment and do something worthwhile.

"But I was wrong. You're weak and vain and self-pitying and utterly useless. There's not one morsel of decency in the whole one hundred and eighty pounds of you. And so far as I'm concerned, I hope you choke on your rotten pack of lies!"

Her eyes were brimming, so that she couldn't see how he took her denunciation, if at all. She whirled

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and marched out of the club, forgetting all about Don, forgetting that she was supposed to get some celebrity story for her column; forgetting everything except a desire to put distance between herself and a man she hated so much that it burned up every other emotion she'd ever had.

IF, DURING the next six weeks, there was any speculation buzzing around Manhattan about the tiff between the aluminun heir and the columnist he'd kidnaped, Rowena didn't know about it. She drove herself to work as she had never worked before. She grew thinner and more pale and her cheeks took on a drawn pinched look. But she covered up the pinched look with rouge and lipstick, and stayed away from scales, so she wouldn't know how much weight she'd lost.

She proceeded about her work like a woman in a trance, never laughing, never joking, never kidding people into giving her the light banter that used to sparkle down the scintillating length of her column.

Mornings after she came home from making the rounds of the night spots, instead of grabbing some sleep, she wrote pages and pages of a satire, which she planned to have published in a book, called, "Memoirs of a Columnist".

Then, one afternoon she was called into the city editor's office.

"What's the matter, Rowena?" he asked brusquely but not unkindly. "Your work's falling down, your column is losing its appeal. We're getting complaints from your former fans."

She didn't change expression. "Are you firing me?" she asked dully.

"No-o-o, but I think maybe you need a rest. Have you got any place you could go for awhile? Get clear away from the city, I mean?"

She shook her head. "And I wouldn't go there if I had. I'm writing a book, and I don't mind the idea of resigning in order to have time to finish it."

He drummed his fingers on the desk. "It's that Sylveston bird that's done this to you, isn't it?' he asked bluntly. "Ever see him anymore?"

"No. Thank heavens," she added to herself.

"He isn't seen around anymore, I've heard," he said, watching her face closely. "But I have it from a very reliable source that he has gone into business—and I don't mean the aluminun business."

Rowena thought that over rather carefully before she said, in what she considered a hardboiled, indifferent voice: "So what?"

"So I want you to go up to the Saymour Building and get a story about him. Whatever Rrutherford L. Sylveston is up to, it will be news."

She started resolutely toward the door. "You can send someone else on that assignment. I'm not getting any more stories about the aluminum heir."

"Huh," grunted the boss, "I thought so."

"You thought what?"

"I thought you were in love with him."

"I am not!" she denied promptly. Too promptly, she realized at once, for the exasperating editor was grinning in a maddeningly knowing way. "I despise the very air he breathes," she added by way of emphasis.

"Mmmm-hmm, I understand all about that. Nevertheless, Sue will take over your column for a few days and give you a chance to rest up. Then you run in to see young Sylveston. Here's his business card. He's leased the whole ninth floor of the Saymor building."

"What on earth for?" she mused, studying the card. His name was neatly engraved in the middle of the card, and under it were the words: "Investment Broker."

THE CITY editor went on talking: "It seems he is angeling a number of young businesses that he thinks are worthwhile but which need financial backing to get a start. But that's for you to get the lowdown on—after you've rested a day or two and feel capable of tackling it. Don't just say 'no' again. Go

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home and think it over."

Rowena went, and conflicting thoughts were buzzing around in her head all the way. Rute was evidently doing the very thing she had advised. But why? Not because she had advised it, surely. Maybe by this time he'd forgotten where the idea originated and believe he'd thought it up all by himself.

Besides, what difference did it make? He was still a 20-carat louse, and that was that. And she was not going chasing after him for any story. Maybe she could inveigle one of her reporter friends into doing the distasteful job for her.

But first she'd lay claim to the few days' rest the boss had promised her. She could certainly use them, she thought drearily.

When she stepped into her apartment, the first person she saw was Dad, and she knew immediately that something exciting had happened.

"Ollie was here a few minutes ago; she let me in. Row, it's come! I've finally got a backer for my cough medicine. After all these years! He's not all set to walk off with a lion's share of the profits, either. He made me the fairest proposition a person could possibly ask... "

"Rute Sylveston," Rowena interjected.

"How did you know?"

"Because I was the one that suggested it, one night on the island. And he blew up like a volcano, called me a cheap chiseler and a lot of other nasty things. I wonder what his game is now."

"Maybe he's come to his senses and realizes you're not a cheap chiseler," her father offered hopefully.

She shook her head. "That guy hasn't any senses to come to. You're not taking any backing from him, do you hear?"

"Now, Daughter, after all—just because you've had a tiff with him! He's on the level, I know he is. It's the chance I've waited all my life for, and I'm not going to throw it away now!" He set his jaw in a stubborn line that reminded her strangely of another square jaw. And she wasn't thinking of her own which was also square, if she'd only realized it.

"You stay right here," she ordered officiously. "I'm going to find out about this." She slammed out of the door and stalked down the hall to the elevator.

The boss had told her to rest up before she called on Rute, but the time was past for that. She didn't even bother to renew her lipstick, or powder the shine from her nose. Five minutes later she was stalking determinedly through a door that was labelled in gold letters: "Office of the President."

It was only when she saw him that all the breath seemed to go out of her. He looked so handsome, and so competent, and wonderfully sure of himself, as he sat behind his immense mahogany desk and looked up at her with an expression of polite inquiry.

When he saw who it was he stood up, and pulled an easy chair closer to the desk for her.

ROWENA hadn't meant to sit down. She always felt she could blow off steam more devastatingly standing. But her knees had turned to rubber, and all the fury that had brought her here with such speed seemed to die down to a deep inner shakiness that couldn't be controlled.

"Did you come to get a story?" he asked quietly. "I've sort of been expecting you."

"No," she said faintly. "Oh, the boss told me to get a story," she admitted with an impatient shrug of dismissal, "but I had no intention of doing it. Then I found out about Dad. What's this about you backing his cough medicine?"

"Yes, I'm backing it. So what?"

"You're not!" she declared, crashing her fist on the smooth desktop. "You're just building him up for a letdown, as one more means of striking back at me, and I'm not going to stand for it. He's too square a person for me to let his heart get broken over a lot of high hopes that will burst like so many bubbles. You've got to tell him that you were

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just stringing him along to spite me."

She was sobbing brokenly, her voice ragged with emotion. Her gray eyes behind the tears looked immense and painfilled."

"Rowena," he said gently, "you look terrible. Have you been ill?"

"Never mind how I look," she snapped. "That's not important."

"It is to me," he asserted firmly. "You look as though you hadn't had a square meal nor a full night's sleep since I last saw you. And I find it is terribly important to me."

Her underlip was trembling ridiculously, and she caught it between her teeth to stop it. When she thought she had herself more or less under control, she spoke stiffly:

"Stop ribbing me. I know I've written some pretty insinuating things about you, and maybe I wasn't entirely justified—but I'll print any kind of apology or retraction you want, if only you'll be on the level with my father."

He thought that over seriously. "There's only one kind or retraction that would suit me," he said at last. "Will you—marry me?"

She looked up at him swiftly then, and she saw that he wasn't smiling.

"Are you kidding?" she whispered hoarsely, still unbelieving. "Why should you want to marry me?"

"Because I'm in love with you. Does that surprise you?"

"Yes," she gasped. "It—it bewilders me. I—can't believe it."

He came around the desk, drew her up into his arms and kissed her, tenderly but thoroughly, and with complete possession.

"Now do you begin to believe it?" he asked in a husky whisper, with his lean brown face pressed against her cheek, his arms bearing her closer to the swift, triumphant hammering of his heart.

"Beginning to," she admitted with a shaky laugh. "Maybe one more kiss would convince me it's real." This time her lips came up to meet his; and she thought dazedly that if she should suddenly wake up, at least she'd have this delirious dream to remember.

AFTER his office had righted itself a little, he got around to showing her the contract for manufacturing her father's cough medicine. Even Rowena, who didn't know much about business contracts, knew this one was giving Mr. McFarland more than he was entitled to. She began to protest:

"You're taking all the financial risk, Rute, and your margin of profit should be greater..."

His lips, catching hers again, silenced her. "You let me take care of that, sweetness. I don't want to get any richer; my income tax is too big as it is. What I want now is to marry you and take you away somewhere for a complete rest, and bring the roses back to your cheeks and the sparkle to your eyes. Darling, darling, it twists my heart in two to see you looking so thin and pale..."

"The island," she breathed ecstatically. "Could we go there on our honeymoon?" she asked, her shining eyes adoring him.

"Could we ever, you little night owl," he cried, hugging her until she couldn't breathe. "Of all the places in the world, that one is the most like home to me. You see, honey, that little island was the only thing my father ever really owned. The happiest moments of my life have been spent on the island—until this one."

"The happiest of mine, too," she amended, and knew in her heart that she was speaking the truth.

THE END

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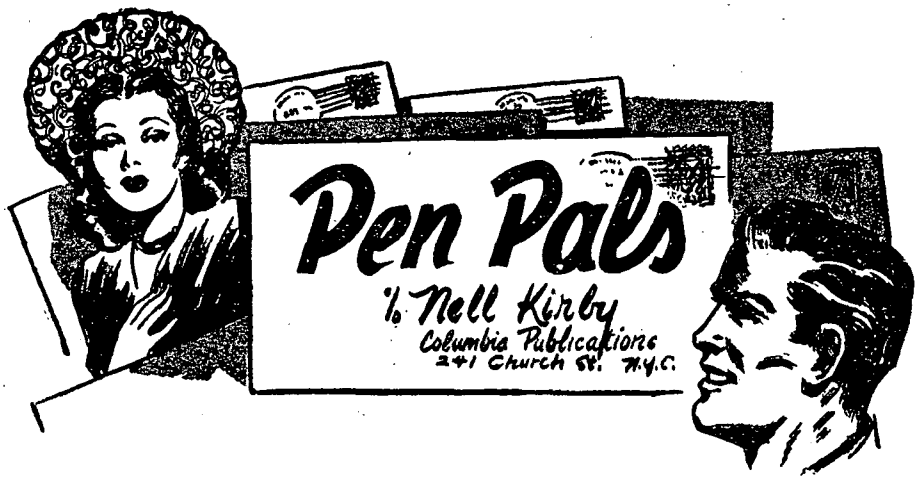

WELCOME PEN PALS!

NELL KIRBY wants all our readers to have an exciting adventure, and, making new friends is exciting and stimulating. You'll find pals who share your own particular interest and hobbies, and who will bring distant parts of the country as close to you as the note of paper held in your hand.

In order for you to receive your mail direct, we will print your full name and address. Address letters,

Pen Pals
Columbia Publications c/o Nell Kirby
241 Church St.
New York, 13, N. Y.

I am a lonely gal of twenty-three who is looking for some pen pals so here is hoping that my mail box will be chucked full. I have blonde hair and blue-green eyes and stand about five feet five.
I love all sports, collecting records, traveling, and writing letters. Would very much like to hear from some pen-pals outside of the U.S. Have tried so many times to join a club of this sort but so far all inquiries have hit the mails waste basket for rejects.
I have a small daughter and am now a widow so would very much enjoy hearing from everyone, male and female.
I also collect odd recipes so girls if your favorite recipe is an unusual one send it my way and let me try it too.
Will answer all letters, so come on and fill this old mail box of mine.
Barbara Yandle, Route 2 Box 76, Enumclaw, Washington.

Somewhere in Korea.
I am a Marine in the U.S.A. 1st. Marine Div. somewhere in Korea.
I would like very much to get all the pen-pals that would care to write. I promise to answer as soon as I can.
I am single, have brown eyes, am a brunette, am 6 ft. 2 inches in height. I like all sports.
Hoping to hear from all very soon.
Pfc. Willa Dean Hardison, Hdq. Btry. 4th. Bn., 11th. Marines, 1st. Marine Div. F.M.F., c/o Fleet Postoffice, San Francisco, California.
P.S. I failed to mention my age. I am 19 years old.

I'm seventeen years old, five ft. 6 in. tall and weigh 115 pounds. I have light brown hair and green eyes. Am a senior in high school, and have several interests, including dancing, horseback riding, record collecting, football and, above all, writing. I'll answer promptly all letters I receive and gladly exchange snapshots. How about some letters, huh?
Janet Anderson, 4 Englewood Ave., Los Gatos, Calif.

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FLAME

By Hope Campbell

"You've got so much," Dave said, softly. "What's *wrong* with you?"

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and DUST

An absorbing full length Novelette

Outwardly, Eva was hard, bright flame and she kept that flame burning brightly because it gave her sister the gracious college life that she herself desired! But she found that some things have to be earned.

EVA WAS a flame of a girl, sedate in a gray suit, a perky cap on her short red-gold curls and the most sensible of heavy shoes on her feet. But she was still a flame, a little hard, a little too knowing, quick to see an angle, as she walked across the campus, looking at the ivy-colored buildings, the quiet charm of the place, sensing the mood of bookish, drowsy peace.

Exactly like a small college in the movies, absolutely perfect, Eva Eaves thought with satisfaction.

Shrewd and thorough checking

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four years ago had told her it was the best place for Bess. But Eva had stayed away, except for a flying five minutes now and then, to bring Bess back from a holiday or pick her up to take her back to Aunt Martha for the summer. Just to prove Bess did have a family and a sister. But Eva had felt she must turn up for Bess' graduation. Even in this outfit, which she had purchased at a conservative New Orleans shop patronized by college and ex-college students, Eva wasn't sure she could get by for more than a few hours. The past five years had written character into her face, Eva knew, and it wasn't the quiet sedate character of the families of most of these girls.

"What are you doing wandering around the campus at this hour?"

Eva started and stiffened defensively, but a fifteen second glance through long lashes, entirely free of mascara for once, gave her the story. She had had to learn to size people up fast. A typical professor, Eva decided instantly, rather pleased at herself for recognizing an unfamiliar type so quickly. Dark rumpled hair, sea-blue eyes, lean bronzed face with a pipe firmly clenched between his white teeth. Casual tweed jacket and slacks. Young enough he was probably an assistant professor or whatever they rated the acts here, and the object of worship and heartbreak to half his girl students.

Eva weighed her words before she confided in a rush. "I had one of those silly impulses and left New Orleans in the middle of the night, so I got here at six o'clock. My sister wrote she had reservations for me for graduation week but I haven't any idea where and I simply didn't have the heart to wake her at this hour. So I'm looking the—place over while I wait."

She finished feeling quite triumphant. Just in time, she had managed to call this a place, not a joint.

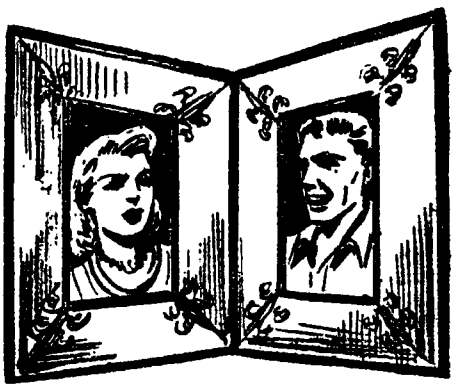
Those blue eyes were twinkling. "Had breakfast yet?"

"Never thought of it," Eva said truthfully. Usually she breakfasted at noon at the earliest. "I didn't know any place would be open at this hour."

"Oh, the old hangout's open," he said carelessly. "It's a sort of a joint but the food won't poison you."

Calling certain places joints was all right, Eva noted quickly.

"By the way, my name is Dave McClure," he drawled. "Sociology. If you'd have breakfast with me, I'm sure your sister will be awake by the time we finish."



EVA'S EYES sparkled with inward amusement. Breakfast with a college professor! The whole gang in the Vieux Carre would laugh at this one when she got back.

A joint, in collegiate language, Eva noticed, was simply a place decorated in college colors, with college slogans painted on the windows and straight short order cooking. But this guy Dave was interesting. With him, sociology wasn't dry and dusty stuff but something living. He did research, all kinds of research. On teen age gangs, good and bad, and what environment did to them. On second marriages. On causes of suicide. On a number of subjects which almost made Eva blush because he mentioned them seriously and she was only used to hearing such things referred to as the slightly off-color jokes of some Emcee.

Dave leaned forward across the booth with sudden interest. "Do you have a degree? I'd say offhand you have an unusually alert, quick and questioning mind."

Now he was congratulating her on

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her mind! Nobody would ever believe a word of this.

"Barely made it through high school," Eva said flippantly. "And I do mean barely. The principal mentioned a few times that I didn't seem to be the scholastic type."

"You have a very interesting mind," Dave insisted seriously. "Perhaps your principal was not a man of broad vision. Beauty and high spirits don't necessarily mean a girl doesn't have a mind. I'd say you were cut out for a career. Marriage too. A person like you can combine the two. That overflowing energy of yours would make it a snap."

"But I've got a career," Eva laughed and hoped the laughter didn't ring as bitterly brittle in his ears as it did in hers. "As for marriage!" She simply shrugged.

"Why not?" those blue eyes lit up.

Eva began to draw on her gloves with elaborate carelessness and repeated the story she always told to protect Bess. "Executive secretary. Interesting work. And pays well enough. But I just don't meet the marrying type of man."

"Not good enough for you," Dave said broodingly and picked up the check and walked to the door with her. "Where is your sister?"

"Chi Pi sorority. I left my car parked in front of it but I got to wandering and—" Eva looked around her uncertainly.

"If you don't know the campus well, it's a little tricky to find your way from here. I'll show you the short cut."

The way led along campus walks, twisting and turning around the buildings and finally to a foothpath, tree-shadowed, paralleling a brook. At a high spot, through a break in the trees, Eva could see a long row of sedate brick houses, windows sparkling, and at a right angle, another row of houses, larger and more varied in architecture.

"Faculty row," Dave said with a wave of his hand toward the sedate houses. Then to the other, "Sorority row. The fraternities parallel the faculty houses on the other side of the campus. And the joints and book shops are on the side where we were."

"Got it," Eva said automatically.

"YOU'VE GOT so much," Dave said softly. "What's wrong with you?"

Eva looked up, pansy-blue eyes genuinely startled. "What do you mean by that?"

"This and so much more."

Eva knew he was going to kiss her. And she knew too, with a sudden panic in her heart, that she could make this no gay teasing kiss, no light laughing evasion. Not with this man.

Dave's lips crushed down on hers and Eva, Eva who knew all the answers and most of the questions, suddenly felt as if the solid ground were shaking beneath her feet. Her eyes closed and her lips responded urgently to his. New life, an aliveness which she had never felt before, raced warmly all through her veins, tingling her into sweet awareness and glowing revelation.

Dave's arms dropped and he stepped back, smiling down frankly into her eyes. "Spring," he murmured. "Wonderful spring. It's a lovely season. And a shame it comes only once a year. I'll see you again, I hope, before the week's over."

Then, with a slight wave of the hand, he was gone, striding back toward the campus. Eva stared after the tall, broad-shouldered figure and all at once, her eyes misted with tears. Eva wiped them away, incredulous at herself. What was this? Eva Eaves crying over a kiss because the guy had blamed it all on spring! Impossible.

Or maybe, Eva tried to tell herself with false humor, it was merely the hour. Being kissed at seven o'clock in the morning was enough to upset anybody.

Eva stood looking down at the scene before her. She recognized Bess' sorority with her car parked in front of it. Then her eyes wandered beyond it, toward faculty row. What would it be like, living there? Serene, Eva was sure, with quiet happiness

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and Beethoven instead of Dixieland, and books and old friends instead of hectic amusements. Again, for just an instant, Eva's eyes misted.

Eva shrugged her slender shoulders impatiently. She had made her choice long ago, because it was the only choice she had, and second-guessing was no good. When her father and mother died, so close to each other, Eva had just finished high school with no encouragement regarding further education. But Bess was sweet and fair and loved school. Their Aunt Martha could provide a home for either or both of them, but there was no spare money for clothes or anything else.

So what could Eva do? She had summed up her assets quite detachedly for a seventeen year old. She had a dusky blues type voice, a talent for dancing, and a slender perfect figure, with alabaster white skin. Aunt Martha could see Bess finished high school and even went on to college, if Eva could earn the tuition and spending money.

With no one else knowing what she meant to do but assuming it was to earn her way through business college, Eva set off to learn her trade. A trade which would make enough money to see Bess through college, which an office job certainly would not. And Eva learned her trade well...so well that now she got top billing as a dancer at one of the best spots in the Vieux Carre.

Eva brushed men off easily enough. She found the drunken customers disgusting and the hopped-up, music-mad men in the bands worse. The one nice man! Eva's full mouth tightened. She had never loved him but she had allowed herself to dream a while. At least, Eva admitted with wry amusement, he had treated her very well by his standards. He had dated her for a full two weeks, nice dates, before he began mentioning a small, private apartment.

Eva touched her face unconsciously. The long hours and hard life of a nightclub dancer had left their marks there but no one would believe how sedate and almost dull the rest of her life was. She had a small apartment by herself, very much by herself, and during the hours she wasn't working, she spent most of her time there, making new costumes, practicing new variations on her dances, reading or puttering in the kitchen. By comparison, Bess' letters told of a far gayer life.

BUT EVA never grudged that. Bess would have fun. Bess would marry well. Bess would have everything. And she, Eva, had merely spent a few years at work she wouldn't have chosen otherwise to give Bess that. The price was small. She was still only twenty-two and once Bess was settled, she could pick and choose some new life for herself.

Eva glanced at her watch and frowned. She had been daydreaming too long. Now it was nearly eight o'clock and surely Bess would be awake.

But Bess was still in bed, yawning over a cup of coffee her roommate had brought her. Eva paused in the doorway, her whole heart warming and softening. Bess had such a childish look, a sleepy baby just awakening. But she looked tired too, Eva noticed with alarm.

"Bess," Eva cried. "You look tired. Want to sleep a little longer?"

Bess tried to yawn and smile simultaneously, shaking her fair head to wake herself. "Of course not." Her voice was low and sweet and vibrant, even when fogged with sleep. "It's just those senior finals.

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Really brutal. And all the parties and dances. I think they plan to turn us out with a BA, small nervous breakdown attached thereto."

"But this week's going to be fun?" Eva asked eagerly.

"Oodles of fun if I live through it," Bess giggled. "You see, there are two men and it's all too involved."

Eva pulled off her hat and sat on the side of the bed. "Involved? How?" she asked, her voice controlled and quiet.

"I've written you about Paul Johns. Dozens of times. The perfect man. Big wheel on the campus. Wonderful family and they approve of me. Wonderful job waiting for him in the family firm."

"I thought your letters were hinting engagement rings," Eva said, with assumed airiness, so Bess wouldn't think she was trying to force a confidence. "Right?"

"Too dreadfully right," Bess said ruefully. "I have his frat pin. And I'm sure he's going to flash a ring on me at the dance tonight."

"It sounds good," Eva said sincerely.

Bess sat up, childlishly slender knees doubled up so she could put her chin on them and wind her arms around her legs. "It's all too good. Except for this other man. Val Lansing."

"What's he like?"

"Different. Intriguing. A little older," Bess said musingly. "He looks like a blond faun. Peaked ears. Triangular smile. Funny slanty eyes. Handsome, really."

"What's he going to do after he graduates?"

"He doesn't know. He's the kind that will sort of wander around, you know, trying to find himself and when he does, he'll be terrific."

This didn't sound so good. "What's the verdict between the two?" Eva asked, a little afraid of the answer.

"I don't know," Bess said honestly. "I know I'm not cut out to be a career girl and Paul's the best, the man for me to marry. But the hitch is that I can't get Val quite out of my head."

"I CAN'T help you much, darling," Eva said slowly. "You've got to figure it out for yourself. But I know this much. I've seen a lot of it in New Orleans. Women who married for money, when they reached thirty, look a hard and discontented forty. Women who married for love and didn't have it easy, still look a happy thirty in their forties. If you can marry for both love and money, swell. But it's your choice to make."

An odd look flickered across Bess' face and then she stirred restlessly, a flushed unnatural vivacity lighting her face. "So it is," she giggled. "Now, Eva pet, will you do me a favor? Paul's my date for the dance tonight and I'll stall him on that engagement ring for a few days. Val's been hanging around, waiting for me to say I'd go with him, and now he's left without a date. Would you go with him like a sweetiepie pet?" Bess' eyes were too feverishly bright. "We'd have so much fun, trading dances and everything."

Eva looked at Bess, dark unease stirring in her. Maybe this was simply a typical romantic college tangle, without cause for alarm. Still Eva felt she was being used for some purpose she didn't understand. Danger signals flashed all along her nerves. Not for herself. But for Bess. What could she do? How could she reasonably object?

"Good idea," she agreed with a forced smile. "Now what about the rest of the program? Your letters were so excited I couldn't make out where I was to stay even."

"I've got dozens of odds and ends to do," Bess said. "Settling my lab bill. Getting a hairdo. Just junky errands. You've had a long drive all night so why don't you try to rest before the dance? We've set aside one of the dorm rooms for visitors but most of them won't be drifting in until late afternoon."

Eva looked away, long lashes a thick fan against her cheeks, trying not to show a sense of rebuff. She

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had looked forward to this day on the campus with Bess, glimpsing her life these last four years and living it vicariously. But Bess couldn't know. Bess had the tag ends of four years of living to tie up.

"That'll be fine," Eva said quickly. "I've already had breakfast so I'll just get my bags out of the car and I'll see you later."

Chapter Two

THE DORM room was pleasant with beds and bureaus evenly spaced, and trees waving outside the open windows and soft twitterings of birds drifting in from outside. Inside, Eva heard the scurryings and laughter of the girls. She was a fool to feel dark currents stirring under it all, Eva told herself vigorously. She had simply seen too much sordidness herself these past few years and she was a fool to drag those memories into this happy, pleasant place.

Eva slept long and deeply. Blue shadows were beginning to dim the brightness of the day when she awoke to see Bess standing over her.

"Have a good rest?" Bess asked. "There's a buffet supper being served in the dining room down in the basement. Snatch a bite and then get dressed and come to my room. Okay?"

Eva nodded silently as Bess turned and practically ran from the room. After all, this was the biggest moment in Bess' life so far and she couldn't realize how off-hand her treatment of her sister was, Eva told herself.

In fact, Bess looked too highly keyed, too tense and yet exalted too. Perhaps a quiet holiday at a resort, Eva planned, would have the child looking rosy and healthy again. The child. Bess was only two years younger than she. But still the child, sheltered and pampered. No mileage on Bess.

Eva dressed and looked at the mirror. All gray for this trip, she had decided, to seem the respectable older sister of a popular senior. Still this gray was soft and floating, shot with hints of silver, above which her flaming hair framed a face Eva had deliberately made up with pale lipstick and little powder. Even her perfume was muted. No one could recognize her in this, even if they had seen her at the Club in her flamboyant costumes and heavy make-up.

She snatched a quick meal and went to Bess' room. Bess was radiant in gold, which made her look like a golden girl, shimmering until everyone around her seemed mere shadows.

Bess drew Eva aside feverishly. "I told Val to pick you up early. Paul's jealous and it's best for them not to meet here. Once we're at the dance and Paul sees you and Val together, I can explain. He knows how hard it is to get dates for older girls." Bess drew her even closer with hot hands. Burning hot and yet dry. "And, Eva, don't look for me here after the dance. A bunch of us are planning a midnight picnic, way

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up on top of a hill, a beautiful place. My roommate will sign me in so don't draw any attention to my absence."

Eva smiled at this urgent intrigue against college rules. So important now, so unimportant in a few weeks. Bess deserved all the fun she could get. Under the glitter and shining eyes, Bess looked very tired.

BESS TOOK Eva downstairs and introduced her to Val. Eva just stood for a moment, looking at him. He was all Bess had said, fair and faunish. Yet Eva couldn't like him. She knew the type. He would drift, yes, but drift down, making mighty pretenses of writing or painting or being on some mysterious business, chiseling, conniving, with a shabby gaudy front and nothing at all behind it. Eva felt a great surge of relief at the thought of Paul, Paul, as steady and enduring as this man was phony.

Val led her out to a car, painted to look like a well cared for old family car, a once expensive car. Eva smiled a little. Typical false fronting, she thought.

"It's too early for the dance," Val said in that odd voice which was almost too soft and yet with a suggestion of rasp beneath. "Want to drift around and look the place over until the dance really gets going?"

"Might be nice," Eva said casually. "I've dashed in and out but I've never really seen the town."

Val drove around the campus and then out around the town, gradually edging, Eva noticed, into the suburbs with many long empty spaces along the lanes. Suddenly Val stopped the car and Eva gave a half nod of gratification. He was the type. An all-out wolf.

"Out of gas?" Eva asked with mock innocence.

"Just thought we'd sit a while," Val said, his arm slipping around her shoulder. "I've always liked Bess but she's a portrait in pastels and you're living flame."

More acute than she had given him credit for, Eva thought wryly. "Bess is a sweet girl," Eva said firmly. "I'm delighted with her college record and her plans for the future."

The arm stiffened around her. "Yes?"

Let Bess tell her own plans, Eva decided. "Not too definite yet," Eva said easily. "But I approve."

"We didn't come out here to talk about Bess, did we?"

Val's arm tightened around her and his fair head started bending toward hers. Eva thought of a dozen answers to the situation, some most unladylike, and dismissed them instantly in favor of polite evasion. After all, she wanted to get to that dance and meet Paul and his family.

"Val," she cried, laughing. "You don't want me to walk into that dance looking a perfect hag, do you? My hair. My lipstick. My dress."

In the semi-darkness, lit only by moonlight, she could see his scowl. Then Val said sullenly, "Why didn't you tell me in the first place that you wouldn't neck. I thought you understood when I asked if you wanted to take a ride."

Lordy, no, Eva thought emphatically. This guy wasn't for Bess. Never.

Then all at once, excitement began to pound in Eva's veins. A college dance, her first college dance! What if she didn't like her date? She was going to her first college dance, thrilled as a tourist on his first visit to the French Quarter, and only that counted.

EVA'S pansy-blue eyes were shining as she and Val walked into the big field house turned into a ballroom for this week. A big name band was playing and invisible rhythms began to pulse through her veins. The decorations, balloons and tissue paper in college colors, somehow gave the place an air of spontaneous gaiety no nightclub ever managed to achieve. The floor was full but not jammed. Eva gave a long sigh of perfect contentment. Just exactly right and as she had dreamed it.

"Hello, there."

Eva whirled, hot color staining

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her cheeks. "Why, Dave," she said breathlessly.

Gosh, but Dave was handsome in a dinner jacket. He made all the other men there seem spindly and boyish and immature, though Dave couldn't be but a few years older. And Eva could see no girl hanging on his arm.

Then Dave's eyes hardened as Val came up and took Eva's arm possessively. Dave's entire expression changed, the smile faded and he left with a stiff little bow.

"So you know our faculty genius?" Val asked mockingly. "Stuffed shirt. Goes around investigating a little of this and a little of that, mostly nasty, and pretends he's the great scientist discovering what makes the American people tick."

"Just met him this morning," Eva said, making a quick mental note.

So the dislike was mutual and, in matters of taste, she was on Dave's side any time. Then a sudden distress tugged at her heart. Surely Dave would realize, Eva thought desperately, that she hadn't picked her escort herself. He couldn't think she really liked a man like Val. For some reason it was urgently important that she see Dave and explain to him before the evening was over.

Dave had kissed her at first sight, on as light an excuse as Val had tried to use, but that was different, so different.

Even with that distress tugging at her, Eva couldn't help thrilling to the music the bright young faces, the unforced gaiety, the bright gowns and the little formalities which were a part of the college tradition. Eva danced beautifully and before long, other men began demanding introductions and cutting in.

Then Dave cut in.

"What are you doing here with that heel?" he demanded tersely. "I'm sure you know the score better than that."

Eva wasn't going to let Bess' bad taste show in public. "Seems it's a tough job to get a date for an aged sister. At least, Bess came up with a date for me."

All at once, Dave's arms were holding her less tensely, more tenderly. "I can't put my finger on anything definite," Dave admitted. "But I've had him in a couple of classes and I've always felt that if I ever got the goods on him, caught him dead to rights, he shouldn't be in any college. Aggressive tendencies growing out of an inferiority complex. A persecution complex. Phony big shot, domineering complex. Wouldn't really know, except that guy really teems with exes."

"Always the scientist," Eva teased.

"AND I'm still trying to figure you out," Dave said frankly. "I've had Bess in my classes too. She's run-of-the-mill except for a hint of something I've never quite understood. Probably boy-crazy and nothing more. But you're a person. A very fascinating and beautiful woman."

"Don't you dare run any tests on me to find my little exes," Eva warned frankly. "I'd hate to think what you'd find."

"At least a dozen at the very worst," Dave said with mock solemnity and his arm tightened even more. "I was only teasing. I think that I'd actually find a fine and unusual person. I—"

"Darling," Bess' high pitched voice called close beside them. "Darling, stop dancing for a minute and meet Paul."

Eva had seldom taken so instant a liking to any man. Paul was perhaps a little quiet, she conceded, but compared to Val he won hands down. A little quietness was far better for Bess' excitable nature. And Paul was a handsome man, in a brown-haired way, regular featured, with a manner slightly more formal than the usual collegiate. But he had a charming smile and a deep soft voice. He looked so solid and dependable. Anything she could do, Eva swore, anything to get Bess to accept that man. He was perfect for Bess. Val would be sordid disaster, sinking little by little, and drag-

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ging Bess with him.

"Solid boy," Dave said, as they danced off again. "Bess is a lucky girl."

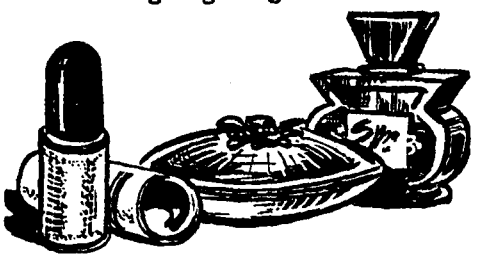
Then someone else cut in and after that, the evening flew. A last singing of the class song and the party was over. Even Eva felt a sort of sad nostalgia for something which was ending, four good years forever gone for all these young men and women.

Val, to Eva's surprise, took her straight home, made not the slightest effort to kiss her and told her formally what a great pleasure it had been to be her escort at the dance.

Eva went upstairs, smiling to herself. The Eternal Eve, as she was billed, had certainly been a flop on that date. And she rather thought it a compliment.

She lingered a while, listening to the excited talk bubbling around her. Then she went to bed, a little reluctantly, but telling herself that Paul wouldn't keep Bess out too late, put her in any compromising position which would cause real trouble.

By two o'clock, Eva fell asleep, knowing Bess wasn't yet in and the program for the next day was heavy. Bess needed a good night's rest and she wasn't going to get it.



Chapter Three

EVA SLEPT uneasily and the instant she awoke, went straight to Bess' room. Bess' roommate, Joanne, was sitting up, still sleepy but eyes worried, looking from Eva to the untouched twin bed beside her.

"She's never done this before," Joanne said with a touch of panic in her voice. "She's stayed out late, often enough, and I've signed her in and covered up for her. But never all night."

Eva gasped inwardly. So this wasn't something new! Bess, who seemed as open and guileless as a child, had been doing this secretly all along. Natural enough, Eva tried to reassure herself. College kids just couldn't resist breaking a rule once in a while. But all night! Eva's heart tightened with panic.

A brown-haired girl stuck her head in the door. "Did Bess get her call? About three this morning? That'll teach me to take a room next to the phone. I was so groggy I just answered it and staggered over here and pounded on the door and went back to bed. I was so dead tired I didn't even remember it really happened until just now."

Eva bent hastily over Bess' bed, pretending to be making it. "I don't know. She didn't say. Who phoned, do you know?"

"Was a man," the girl yawned. "I think I recognized the voice but I was walking in my sleep so I couldn't tell you now."

A voice yelled down the hall and the brown-haired girl asked, "Are you Bess' sister It's for you."

For the first time in her life, Eva felt the black weakness of fear and fainting sweeping over her. Then she stiffened. Just a little trouble, a college escapade which could be fixed up. For once, Bess must have been caught at her little trick. Eva forced herself to go down the hall to the phone, forced herself to sound calm.

The voice at the other end of the line was courteous and official. "Miss Eaves? My name is Bronson. Don't want to scare you but you must prepare yourself for a shock. May we pick you up in about ten minutes?"

"Who is this?" Eva asked from a fright-constricted throat, as that black wave swept over her again.

"The police department, Ma'am. I hope it won't embarrass you to ride in one of our squad cars."

"Not at all," Eva choked out. "Ready in ten minutes."

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She raced into the dormitory and fumbled among her clothes. She wouldn't think, Eva told herself, she wouldn't. The gang simply must have been picked up for being out in the town after hours. Or, at worst, it was a car accident. She wouldn't conjure up nightmares. She must keep herself calm for the emergency so she could help Bess in any way possible.

She took a last distrait glance in the mirror. For all her fumblings, she looked her usual trim self in the gray suit. Only the dark shadows which had suddenly appeared around her eyes gave any hint of trouble.

The police car was being stared at from a dozen sorority lawns when Eva went downstairs but she ignored the curious looks and walked straight over to it, chin up, and got into the car beside a ruddy-faced man in plain clothes sitting in the back seat and the driver started the car smoothly.

The plain clothesman wasted no words on useless courtesies. "I'm Bronson. How frank has your sister, Bess, been with you about her life here at college?"

IN SPITE of his gruff, almost angry manner, Eva instinctively liked Bronson. She felt he was angry at whatever had happened, not at any person or thing.

"Not as much as I thought," Eva admitted. "I'm sure she has loved every minute of being in college. Bess has had a fine time and been quite popular, and her grades were good enough."

"But what didn't you know?" Bronson insisted relentlessly.

Complete honesty would help Bess best, Eva decided instantly. "That she was in the habit of staying out after hours and her roommate covered up for her. But I guess more than one college girl does that."

"What about her boy friends?"

Was this a grilling, Eva wondered. Still she had a feeling this man was a friend, not an enemy.

"She's been dating Paul Johns, quite seriously, had his pin and I understood they planned to make it a formal engagement at the end of this week, with everyone's full approval."

"Any other men?"

"A fellow named Val Lansing. I disapproved of him as much as I approved of Paul. But he seems to have a type of fascination which might appeal to an inexperienced girl like Bess. I'm sure it was nothing more than that. Just Bess' final flutterings and hesitations before she got engaged."

"Would you say Paul is jealous of Val?"

A slight shadow covered Eva's face. Paul must be protected too. "Certainly Paul is the sort of man who would expect his future wife to conduct herself in a manner beyond reproach. Val, I would say, is far the less stable personality."

"Who was she with last night, after hours?"

Eva's eyes widened. "She didn't say but I assumed it was Paul."

Bronson grunted slightly. Eva looked at him incredulously. He wasn't crying but if he had been a woman, he certainly would have been in tears.

"This is going to be a shock, as I warned you before," he finally said gruffly, as if to hide the emotion within himself. "Bess has been indiscreet and—and you must brace yourself for what's coming."

Dead, Eva knew then, dead as she had guessed from the moment she got that phone call, though she had refused to acknowledge it to herself. She stared straight ahead, dry-eyed, while a long icy shudder shook her. But she mustn't break down now, Eva thought even as one involuntary chill after another shook her, not until she had done whatever still could be done for Bess.

"I'm all right," she assured Bronson in a tightly controlled voice. "Oh, is this the hilltop? I don't know the place, but Bess told me a whole gang was coming up here last night after the dance, on a picnic."

"A whole gang?"

"Yes."

CARS WERE parked on the hilltop and a small group of men were huddled around a spot nearby.

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The moment the police car stopped, Eva got out and walked forward, steadily, automatically, face dead white, but mouth and eyes stonily set.

Eva thought she was ready for what she must see. But she took one look and her dress sagged and the world blacked out around her. Then she felt firm hands grasping both her elbows from behind, sending messages of strength and help all through her, and she managed to open her eyes and look again.

Nothing could have prepared her for this horror, Bess lay there like a broken golden doll, the bright gold stained and torn, with her arms and legs crooked at odd angles. Eva fought against nausea and looked around.

Then she saw Paul standing nearby, and nearly screamed. Paul, covered with darkly dried blood too. Paul! Oh, not Paul.

Eva started uncontrollably. That was Dave's voice, his hands supporting her.

"What—" Eva began in a wavering voice but couldn't finish.

Dave's grip tightened reassuringly. "Take it easy, honey. This is the worst and it's done and over."

Eva nodded her red-gold head numbly.

"Here's what happened," Dave went on. "I usually take a walk before breakfast as I was doing the other morning when we met. This morning I decided I wanted to see the view from this hill. I found them here, Paul holding Bess in his arms and so dazed it was fifteen minutes before I could get him to talk. Finally he told me Bess seemed so odd at the dance last night that he had been worried and on an impulse had tried to reach her at the sorority house but she didn't come to the phone. On a hunch, Paul started driving around, searching all the after-hours spots he knew. He found Bess like this, an empty champagne bottle beside her and no sign of a picnic or party otherwise. So it must have been Bess and just one other person. He had just stayed here with her all night until I came along and, after I got the story, phoned the police."

"There was a call for Bess, very late last night, and if the girl heard the voice again she might be able to identify it," Eva said dazedly. "But Bess said this was a picnic for the gang."

"No gang," Bronson said roughly. "Just Bess. And one other person, the murderer. Dave, see those bloodstains?"

"Paul said he had been holding her all night," Dave objected quietly.

"Now, Miss Eaves, we'll need information from you," Bronson said. "We might as well get it right now. What relatives do we get in touch with?"

Aunt Martha, Eva thought, trying to make her shock-fogged mind work and rejected the idea instantly. After the scandal this would make, Aunt Martha wouldn't let Bess be buried in the family lot.

"I'll take care of everything," Eva said slowly and heavily. "Just let me know what I have to do."

"You provided for Bess financially? How are you employed?"

EVA LOOKED at Dave once, a long look, a look of sad farewell and swallowed the bitterness in her throat. Dave had been intrigued by her, had respected her. The truth would end all that but this was no time to lie.

"I'm a night club dancer in the French Quarter in New Orleans," Eva said clearly. "I couldn't have supported Bess as I have been doing since we were left alone in any other way."

Bronson stared at her, wide-eyed. "I can verify this?"

"Of course. I'm billed as The Eternal Eve. You can easily investigate the Club where I work, my apartment, everything about me. I'll be glad to give you whatever information you want."

"Please, names and addresses."

Eva gave them and then said, not looking at Dave, "May I go now, please? I think it would be best for me to move to a hotel."

Bronson nodded agreement. "My

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driver, Bill over there, will take you to the dormitory to pack your clothes and then to a hotel. He'll also leave orders that no calls or visitors are to be allowed to reach you. I want to issue the first statement to the press and then I'll see you before you talk to any reporters."

Eva nodded gratefully and somehow managed to walk steadily to the car. Then everything was a daze through which she moved automatically, doing what must be done, barely conscious of anyone, until she was finally alone in the hotel room with her bags neatly stacked at the foot of the bed.

Then Eva cried. For her own long years, wasted now. For Bess and the life she might have had. For the young and lost and beautiful, and all the might-have-beens for them both. For shattered dreams, and especially a dream so intangible it was hardly a dream at all, just a dream of a dream about a tall bronzed man with sea-blue eyes.

Eva cried and slept and woke and cried and slept again. When she woke again a curious calm was in her. The first rebellion, the first shock were done. Sadness and heartbreak would linger but now she could face what she must, outwardly unshaken.

Eva unpacked her bags and put on a plain gray dress. This was a police matter and until she heard from them, she could do nothing but wait.

A tap at the door. Eva stiffened, panic flooding over her. Reporters?

"Eva," Dave's voice called softly. "Eva, I want to talk to you. There's a small writing room, quite deserted, on the mezzanine. Will you meet me there?"

Eva's hand flew to her throat. Oh, no, she couldn't face Dave now he knew what she was, not that, to the scholastic scientist, she was merely an odd specimen under the microscope. Then she remembered that whatever there was to do, she must face it.

"I'll be down there in five minutes," she said, quite steadily. "Go on down and wait."

EVA COULDN'T bear to look in the mirror. Beauty didn't count now. She was branded in Dave's eyes by her work. That was all Dave needed to know about her to make her socially impossible in his eyes, regardless of the quiet and reserved way she had lived. For a moment rage shook Eva in great waves because a label could brand a person, regardless of what that person really was. Then she forced herself to calmness.

Head held high, Eva walked down to the mezzanine. Dave jumped up, eyes stormily disturbed, muscles showing on his lean jaw.

"Paul's been arrested," he said without preliminaries. "It seems to be an open and shut case. Motive, Bess refused his ring last night. Paul admits that. He was her date last evening. The girl who answered the phone can't identify his voice, so that's out though it was a pretty weak alibi anyhow. Bess was killed between one and two o'clock and Paul could have slipped away to make that alibi call afterwards and then gone back."

"But that doesn't make sense," Eva gasped.

"It gives the police a quick arrest and the D.A. a fast conviction," Dave said grimly. "That's enough for them. Not for me, I'm fighting mad. I know that boy and he's psychologically incapable of murder. Besides being smart enough not to be found like that if he had killed Bess. He simply loved her beyond all reasoning and thought. He couldn't leave her alone up there."

Paul's nice family, Eva grieved for a moment. Then she said, low-voiced, "Isn't it possible that Bess had a date with Paul for the first part of the evening and then made a late

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date with someone else?"

"That's what Paul claims. He last saw Bess walking up toward the porch because she didn't want him to see her to the door, in plenty of time to sign in. That was one of the things which worried him and made him call later."

"I believe Paul," Eva said flatly. "And I think I know someone else in Bess' life who is capable of murder."

"So do I," Dave said grimly. "But the police are satisfied. I'm afraid they won't make another move in the case."

"But Bronson seems to be a man of integrity," Eva faltered.

"He has to play along with the department policy."

Dave caught her hands in his suddenly. "Look, I'm tied hand and foot for the moment, until this graduation stuff is all over. But afterwards, I'll be free for the summer and, as I told you, I'm fighting mad about the dirty deal Paul's getting."

"So am I."

"Let's get together on it," Dave said eagerly. "Where can I locate you later?"

Eva's chin went up softly, "In New Orleans. I'll be easy to find. The Eternal Eve, five shows a night."

"That sounds like a crack," Dave said slowly.

"It's meant to be. I know you'd like to do a little research in a new field, the life history and living habits of a night club dancer." Eva flung at him. "I'll introduce you around if you like. I'm afraid my case history wouldn't be of much use to you."

"Eva," Dave cried and started to draw her closer into his arms.

EVA JERKED away roughly and at the same instant was appalled to realize how much she wanted the comfort and warmth of his kisses. But to Dave, she was merely a potential case history to be worked up into interesting statistics, with the added advantage of being conveniently tied up in a murder case which interested him. And she thought stormily. She didn't feel at all statistical about Dave. A gal could break her heart mighty easily over a guy like Dave, Eva reflected bitterly, but if she were smart, she'd never give him a chance. And she'd been around enough to be smart. She'd wised up early about nice guys.

Eyes hard and wary, Eva said, to make her only interest in him plain to Dave, "You'll keep an eye on the man?"

"I'll make it my business to see where he goes when he leaves here. He's bound to leave a forwarding address at the head office and I can get it easily."

"Good," Eva said with a bluntness which was close to rudeness. "The police have my New Orleans address. So let me know."

"I thought we were in this together," Dave said slowly, his eyes puzzled and a little angry.

"All I want is to find the real murderer of my sister," Eva said flatly. "And thanks for the help. Goodbye."

Eva went back to her room, unshed tears heavy behind her eyes. But she knew all about nice guys and girls like her. Better to have this dull ache in her heart and unshed tears than a real heartbreak later.

Then there were so many things to do and Eva was grateful for them, because they kept her from thinking. A complete statement to the police and a short statement to the reporters. Funeral arrangements. One visit to Paul, who looked stunned and pale, and a whispered promise that she knew this was a mistake and would do anything she could for him, though she knew his family would buy the best legal advice obtainable. And always, bright head held high, eyes straight ahead, she ignored the curious stares and nudges and murmurs all around her.

Finally Eva packed up Bess' clothes and books, simply tossing them unsorted into trunks and suitcases, and left town. Left town without seeing Dave again.

"Just as well," Eva muttered to herself, her full mouth a tight mis-

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erable line of determined endurance.

Chapter Four

THE CLUB manager, as Eva had guessed he would, practically fell on her neck in gratitude the minute she reached New Orleans. Such wonderful publicity, he glowed. Though he was sorry and all his condolences, he added hastily, when he saw the icy glint in Eva's eyes.

"I won't be billed as Bess' sister," Eva told him stonily. "Enough ghouls will flock to the Club to stare at me without that. Or would you rather I took my act somewhere else?"

The manager deflated instantly, agreeing the billboards outside his place would carry only the usual blurbs about her act. Not another word, he swore, wiping his brow with anxiety, not a syllable.

Almost a week passed before Eva could bring herself to unpack Bess' possessions. She looked at the clothes she had bought Bess, soft sweaters, endless blouses, beautiful skirts, half a dozen evening dresses, tailored suits and piles of accessories. What could she do with them?

For a moment, a shudder passed over Eva and then she shook her bright head briskly. These clothes were not contaminated, carrying the fate of their owner with them. They were pretty clothes and dozens of shabby writers and artists and dancers in the Quarter would wear them gladly if they didn't know the source. Eva had the clothes cleaned and took them to a second hand shop, accepting nothing for them and insisting that an absurdly low price be put on them. And went away feeling freer and glad the shop owner hadn't recognized her.

The diaries and momentoes and dance programs and text books and one coded notebook, with bits of poetry inserted on extra sheets, she simply pushed aside for sorting later.

Within a very few days, Eva saw those clothes worn proudly by girls who had always been shabbily dressed. She saw them all over the Quarter and somehow it helped the ache in her heart.

Her act was filling the Club to overflowing. The manager was ecstatic and Eva found a bonus in her pay envelope each week. For herself, she did her dance act five times a day as beautifully and conscientiously as she could and ignored the audience completely.

Eva was at home one afternoon, in her small apartment overlooking a flower-filled patio, placidly listening to the radio, while she added neat sequins to the silver net costume on which she was working. She started at the knock on her door and then shrugged. Just someone dropping in for a chat.

"Come in," she called casually.

Then, as the door opened, her eyes dilated blackly. Dave grinned and walked in and looked around and finally nodded his head in approval of the gay bright room which Eva had painted and slip-covered herself.

"I don't know how welcome I am," he drawled. "But I think I've got something interesting and I suspect it's more than coincidence. Val's forwarding address is a P. O. box in New Orleans."

"Oh, no," Eva gasped.

"Oh, yes," Dave corrected and calmly pulled a chair up close to hers. "Go on sewing and tell me what's new with you."

EVA DROPPED the silver net, too shaken to attempt the delicate work. "Nothing much. I gave Bess' clothes away but I haven't tried to look through her books and stuff otherwise."

"Are there, by any chance, any diaries?"

"Why, yes. And one notebook in a sort of code. They're all over in that painted chest under the cupboard."

"I want to look them over," Dave said and jumped up.

Dave brought the armloads of papers and books and dumped them beside his chair. Then he got the wastebasket.

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"Sentimental?" he inquired briskly. "I see a lot of these are just lecture notes and of no use to anybody."

"Throw away anything you like," Eva said dully.

Dave was here. Dave was here and they were like strangers, yet worse than strangers with something vibrant still flowing between them. Vibrant but not pleasant, not happy. Eva tried to work but she couldn't, not with that unmentioned tensity tugging at her.

Dave sorted ruthlessly, throwing away everything until he had only the text books set aside and the diaries and coded notebook. He glanced through the diaries quickly.

"Not a great deal here," he decided. "Mainly an engagement book to keep her dates straight. Still, it's worth keeping. Now this coded thing. It might be interesting. I don't think Bess was capable of dreaming up any code too complicated."

Eva didn't look at him. "Should we take it to a—"she began hesitantly.

Dave's bright smile flashed. "Heck, gal, how do you think I fought the war? Deciphering codes is right up my alley."

Dave sat at a table and began to work with notebook and pencil. Eva watched him for a while and then stirred restlessly. She couldn't take any more of this, of Dave's being here and yet, in an odd sort of way, not being with her at all.

She jumped up. "Time for tea. I'll dash out and get some cookies and newspapers. Do you like tea?"

"Fine," Dave said without lifting his head.

The fast trip around the corner to pick up what she needed didn't help that strange odd turmoil stirring in her. Maybe, Eva decided with wry honesty, she had looked forward to seeing Dave more than she knew and now he was so entirely impersonal her heart hurt with the rebuff. She had asked for it and she was getting it. And it was all for the best, she told herself harshly, the little ache now and no heartbreak later.

Eva put the water on to boil and set the tea tray with her best china. Then she glanced casually at the newspaper while she waited for the water to boil.

Eva gasped and almost screamed aloud. Oh, no, she shrieked inwardly, while her eyes snatched at the printed words in great gulps. Then she swayed back against the wall, weakly limp, nearly fainting.

"What's the matter?"

Dave was at her side, arm around her, sea-blue eyes dark with anxiety. Eva had to try three times before she could speak.

Then she whispered at last, "The paper."

"LATER," Dave said curtly and picked her up, cradling her against his strong shoulder and strode over and put her on the daybed, placing her comfortably with quick deft hands.

"Lie still," he ordered. "I'll make the tea and look at the paper. Then we'll talk."

Eva lay quiet, eyes closed, but she couldn't stop her mind from adding up terrific facts to make a horrible total. She mustn't get herself into a state of panicky confusion, Eva told herself. She must keep her head clear to explain to Dave, although he had already said he thought Val's presence here was more than coincidence. But he didn't know the rest. As for herself— Long uncontrollable shudders shook her, time and again.

After a long silence, followed by the soft clatter of china and another pause, Eva heard Dave drawing a small table up beside the daybed.

"Feel up to drinking your tea?" Dave asked.

Eva nodded silently and sat up and took the cup. Dave jerked his head toward the papers piled on the kitchen table as he poured his own cup.

"Now what was there about that to send you into such a tizzy?" Dave asked quietly. "Some half-baked writer got herself strangled in her apartment in the Quarter and the apartment was ransacked. Not pleasant, I admit, but why should

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you go into a blackout over it?"

Eva's hands began shaking so violently she had to put her cup down. She looked at Dave with tragic eyes, trying to find the words which would convince him that what she said was true.

"That girl," Eva said haltingly. "I knew her slightly, by sight and name. And she wasn't half-baked. A good kid."

"So?"

"She was about my size, redhead too, and she got one of Bess' dresses," Eva shook her head, trying to clear her mind of creeping horrible fears. "I saw her wearing it and, by the description, she was wearing it when she was killed. In other words, the killer could have thought it was I, wearing Bess' clothes."

Dave scowled darkly. "And Val's in New Orleans."

"That's just it," Eva said eagerly, though fear was still tremulously dark within her. "Somebody mistook her for me, followed her home and ransacked the place. Looking for something I must have packed up among Bess' things and have here, I'd guess."

"But Val knows what you look like."

"On a dimly lit street? In an apartment in which the lights may not have been turned on when he struck? And I doubt if he dared show much light while he searched."

Dave gave one brief exclamation and crashed his cup into the saucer. He raced to the table where he had been working and snatched up the whole bundle.

"I wasn't going to let you in on too much of this," Dave admitted bluntly. "It isn't nice. But neither is murder."

"Tell me," Eva said through white lips.

DAVE POINTED at the loose sheets. "Those poems. Love poems to Bess. I can't identify the writing definitely as Val's without a sample to compare. But I'm positive it isn't Paul's. His handwriting is very distinctive and unforgettable. Anyhow take a look at them."

Eva read the poems, face paling and her mouth tightening with distaste. Strange poems, the daydreams of a distorted mind which would not be crossed.

Eva looked at Dave, horror in her eyes. "These aren't sane. And written to Bess."

"I suspect Val had the right to write anything he pleased to Bess," Dave said quietly. "Now this code. It was child's play to crack it. I've translated part of it already. Bess wrote it, all about Paul and Val. I'm going to translate the whole thing because it might be valuable but I don't think it should be made public if it can be avoided."

Dave went back to work while Eva cleared away the tea thing. But she was tense, involuntarily starting now and then and looking back over her shoulder.

But, she forced herself to go through her usual motions, changing into her suit in the small dressing room and packing her large purse with the things she would need that evening. Then she went into the main room.

"I have to go to work now," Eva said quietly. "You're welcome to stay here and work on that code if you want to."

"Don't you want me to take you to your club?"

Eva forced a laugh. "It's broad daylight. This is the dinner show. I'll be perfectly all right."

"What time's your last act?"

"Two o'clock."

"I'll be there to bring you home."

Eva simply nodded, trying not to show her relief. But, as she walked to the Club, she instinctively kept from getting too close to anyone and just as instinctively hung on the fringes of crowds so she was never alone.

Backstage, everybody was chattering eagerly about the murder. Eva turned away sickly and went quietly to her dressing room and began to work on a spangled ribbon for the new costume.

Eva went through her dances mechanically, in a sort of numbed, dazed fear which made everything

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seem unreal, and she was glad she was numb because if she allowed herself really to face the situation, she knew she would go into screaming hysterics.

Then, through her hazy state, Eva realized it was time for the last show. It was her most seductive dance. And Dave might watch it. Eva felt color flooding her face. For an instant, Eva thought of walking out right then and never coming back. Then her chin went up. The funeral and everything had been expensive. She needed at least a few hundred dollars ahead for her fresh start.

Anger and defiance flaming in her, Eva went out on the stage. Out of that anger and defiance, she was a flame, the seduction of all women wrapped up in one shiningly clad white body and inviting face. The audience stilled, caught in the living emotion which vibrated from her, holding them in an intangible net.

EVA FELT drained and weary when she finished. Mechanically she changed into a street suit and repacked her purse. One of the girls called to her that a man was waiting in the corridor. Eva stiffened and then relaxed. She had known the situation was impossible from the first, so she might as well accept it now with outward placidity.

But involuntary tears misted her eyes at the sight of that tall strong figure. Sternly, Eva blinked them back.

She asked casually, "Catch my dance? How'd you like it?"

"Tops," Dave said promptly. "But why don't you turn all that fire and energy and intelligence into something worthwhile?"

Eva bit her lip. He'd heard her say she had gone into this work only for Bess' sake. And didn't believe it, obviously. So he would only take it as an alibi if she told him she intended to get out as fast as she could. Why bother?

"I've heard tell," Eva said lightly, "of dancers who ended up wealthy women. Did you finish the translation?"

"Enough to show Val was in a mood to kill Bess when he realized he was losing her. Enough to see that he's the type, now the murder is safely tagged on Paul, to do anything to keep it there. Including murder, for he apparently knew about this coded diary, to get back the only thing that would change the picture and make him look bad."

"You're sure, Dave—" Eva began hesitantly.

"Look, Eva, when there's a good guy and a bad guy in a girl's life, usually it isn't the good guy who causes the trouble. Could be but I'd bet against it."

They started down the street, with its gaudy flashing signs and background of music and loud conversation from the saloons, interspersed with dark alley openings which faded away into shadowy sinister nothingness.

Dave's hand tightened protectively around Eva's arm. He said a little awkwardly, "Do you realize how serious this is for you?"

"If I don't realize, why are my teeth chattering?" Eva asked with an attempt at flippancy. "I'm scared stiff."

"You need a guard," Dave said seriously. "Night and day for a while. I don't imagine you could get police protection, even if we showed them that book."

Eva stiffened ever so slightly, sensing what was coming. Nice guys. So courteous, so considerate, so very much with only one thing on their minds. Suddenly she was praying, silently, frantically. Please don't let Dave say it, she prayed. Like the translation. Even if I know what it is, don't make it tangible and real. Leave me something, please, please, even if I know it's only an illusion.

"I don't know how we could rig it up," Dave went on, oblivious of the suddenly rigid arm in his grasp. "But you need somebody around, somebody with a permit and a gun and not afraid to use it. I've got all that. My research sometimes takes me into some pretty tough districts."

"I'm sure," Eva muttered distraitly.

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BECAUSE, like a flashback, Eva all at once remembered an impression which hadn't registered at the time, in her wrought-up state, but returned now, clear as a photograph etched on her memory. During the third show, yes, that was it.

"Dave," she gasped. "I was in bad shape all evening and I never pay much attention to the customers anyhow. But I saw something during the third show and it didn't register until just now. Or maybe I didn't want to admit I'd seen it, even to myself. There was a man, way back, sort of hidden away. Fair like Val. He looked like Val."

"It could have been Val," Dave said. "Which proves what I was saying. You need twenty-four hour protection. And I'm about the only guy who knows the score and can provide that protection."

"Just how?" Eva's voice was dangerously soft and quiet.

"We'll have to figure some angles," Dave admitted cheerfully. "That apartment of yours is compact, to say the least, and I refuse to roll up on the doormat outside like Faithful Fido. We'll work something out."

"Such as?"

"Maybe we can hang a drape to give some privacy, walling off a cot in your dressing room or the kitchenette."

Eva tensed and suddenly her voice was low and shaken with restrained anger and heartbreak. "How long do you think I believe you'd stay behind that curtain? I've met you nice guys before. All honey and compliments and 'what can I do for you, darling'. No, thanks. I'd rather take my chances with Val."

Dave jerked her to a stop then, under a street lamp and looked straight down into her blazing eyes. "First you accuse me of being interested only in the life of a Vieux Carre dancer. That wasn't too bad. It is an interesting bit of Americana. But this! I hope you understand I'm the one who feels insulted. And disillusioned. And, considering your attitude—"

He broke off suddenly, whirled and stared fixedly down the street behind them. Then, without a word, he darted off. Eva stared after him. What was wrong? He couldn't be running away from her because he couldn't face her. Then fear slashed through her. Of course. Dave had seen something or someone in that aimless crowd in the next street and gone in pursuit.

A scream strangled in Eva's throat and she turned and ran like mad after Dave. She brushed through the crowd heedlessly. They didn't exist. Nothing existed, except that Dave had gone racing toward danger, vicious, murderous danger.

Eva didn't think of herself. She reached the spot where she had lost sight of Dave. There! That dark alley. She plunged into the alley, so dark she finally groped and fumbled but she kept going. Then she crashed into a wooden barrier. She felt around cautiously. A door. A door swung wide open. And it led to a stairway, black and dankly evil-smelling.

SLOWLY Eva crept up the stairs. Twice she went to her knees. Above her nothing stirred or seemed to breathe. But she could feel electrically vibrant danger lying in wait. The feeling tingled all along her nerves, until her mouth was dry with fear and her pulse pounded painfully.

Then, like the unexpected crack of rolling thunder, noise crashed overhead. The unmistakable muffled thud of body against fighting body, half-choked words and gasps and the one final floor-shaking pound of a body hitting the wall, shaking the entire rickety old building.

Dave, Eva thought, and the blood was racing through her veins until she felt blinded and almost senseless with fright. But still she hurried through the darkness up those stairs, never thinking of turning back.

Out of the blackness, a ray of light flashed abruptly, followed by the sharp report of a gun shot.

"Oh, no," Eva moaned and started to run toward that pinprick of a light.

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To Eva, it seemed she ran a minute, an hour, a second. Time had no meaning. Then she was standing in a doorway, trembling from head to foot and unaware of it.

The room was a tableau of disorder, old broken packing cases littered it and the corners of the room drifted away into vague shadows, beyond the small beam of a flashlight set on one of the cases. As in a shadow frame, the beam lit a picture. Blood on the floor. The glint of a knife. And one shadowy body bending over another on the floor.

Again, for just an instant, Eva blacked out. Then she blinked the mist from her eyes and an involuntary gasp of relief burst from her lips. Because the light glowed on the dark head of the kneeling figure, not a fair head.

"Dave," she cried. "Oh, Dave, you're safe."

And she burst into tears of sheer shock and relief.

Dave looked at her for an instant, he half started to rise as if to take Eva in his arms and comfort her. Then his lean face hardened.

"What are you doing here?" Dave said sharply. "This is no place for you. This guy came for me with a knife. So I had to put a bullet through his shoulder to stop him and then knock him over the head with the butt of my gun to keep him quiet. Everything's under control now. You get the first policeman you see to come up here. Then go straight home. I'll probably bring some detectives up to look at that translation."

Eva whitened as if he had struck her. She had gone after Dave, heedless of any danger to herself, but she had also spoken words to him which couldn't be recalled. Ever. That was clear.

Eva's chin went up proudly, though black heartbreak was tearing at her. "I know just where to find one," she said with cold formality. "He'll be here in five minutes."

SHE FOUND the policeman on his usual beat and then went home, moving in a fog, so distrait she hardly knew what she was doing except she was following Dave's orders. The apartment was in disorder, dishes in the sink and papers all over the table. The paper-littered table drew Eva irresistibly.

What was one more illusion lost, when she had just lost her world? Because Dave was her world, her life, her very life and now he was forever lost.

Mouth set grimly, Eva picked up the translation. Gradually, as she read, tense hysterical mirth bubbled up in her, bitter laughter. Bess, who looked so demurely quiet and typically collegiate, would have fitted into the French Quarter better than she. The Quarter would have suited Bess' unstable, sensation-seeking nature perfectly. As perfectly as Eva, who looked so like a flame, would have loved the college atmosphere.

She had given Bess what she had wanted for herself, perhaps forced it on Bess. College for Bess hadn't been dull. She had had what she called 'fun', the sort of thing from which Eva had always remained aloof. This, Eva decided, was the last bitter irony of it all.

Suddenly the world was a cold tired place which held nothing much Eva wanted. Later, much later, when the memory of all this had dimmed, she would find some niche for herself. Not that it mattered much any more, Eva thought dully.

When the knock at the door came, Eva simply went numbly and opened it and stood aside. Dave and a detective walked in.

Vaguely, Eva was aware of Dave's point by point insistence that Val was guilty. The motive was there, secret meetings, including a couple in which Val had threatened violence if Bess ever tried to ditch him. Even plans for the final meeting were mentioned, with Bess looking forward to a final showdown, reveling in the anticipation of hurting Val, telling him she was through and then laughing at his anger.

"Got it sraight?" Dave asked. "Better check Lansing's alibi for the time that gal was killed last

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night. She looked like Eva and wore one of Bess's dresses and Lansing must have been desperate to recover this evidence before anybody else saw it."

"He's a wrong one, all right," the detective agreed. "As you say, this other guy—Paul Johns, is it?—had no motive since he didn't know about Lansing and Bess and his actions are consistent with the shock of finding dead the girl he loved and wanted to marry. I'll take this stuff with me. Drop in tomorrow and we should have a lot of information by then."

EVA OPENED the door, thinking dully that this was her last glimpse of Dave. But only the detective left. Eva turned to Dave, eyes wide and darkly questioning.

"Well, we've saved Paul," he said grimly.

Wild unreasoning anger flared in Eva. They had saved Paul. But what about her?

"That's just lovely," she said bitingly. "After all, saving Paul was the only important thing in the world."

Instantly shame flooded her. How could she have let herself say that? Saving Paul had been important because her sister had put him behind those bars.

Dave just looked at her, sea-blue eyes impersonally questioning. "What makes you like that?" he asked slowly.

"Like what?" Eva demanded stormily. "Oh, Bess was a nice little college girl and look how she ended. I'm a dancer in the Quarter.

"I didn't mean that," Dave said quietly. "I was referring to the chip on your shoulder."

"But you thought the other," Eva raged back at him. "And I resent it. Oh, how I hate it. Maybe I even hate all men for what they think of me, the way they look at me at the Club, everything."

"That doesn't sound like you. You like people. You help people, even sacrifice yourself for them. Why break out in this rage at me?"

Because it was Dave, Eva thought bitterly, very especially Dave, not just any man. Others she could ignore or laugh off.

Chin stiffly high, Eva said defiantly: "Because I'm a dope. "Because I still had an illusion or two left to lose and now I've lost them. Because I hoped you were a different kind of nice guy and I hated finding out you were like all the rest."

"I only tried to help you, only wanted to help," Dave said in a harsh musing voice. "I was suggesting everything I could for your welfare. No strings or hidden implications. I meant just what I said, Eva, and nothing more. I consider myself a man of integrity and that slap in the face, especially from you, hurt."

"Especially me?" Eva whispered and looked up at Dave with tears in her eyes. "I—I acted like that because—because it was especially you."

Suddenly she was in Dave's arms and he was kissing her and all that tingling sweet new awareness welled up in Eva again. That awareness, this heartshaking glimpse of something new and incredibly beautiful, was all that mattered in the world and the world was in Dave's arms and kisses.

Then a thought flashed across Eva's mind, as if she had stepped from warm glowing sunshine into dank cold darkness, and she jerked away.

"DARLING," Dave reproached. "What's the matter now? Aren't you convinced that my intentions are completely, even stuffily, honorable?"

"All right. We love each other and want to get married," Eva snapped through trembling lips. "But we can't. You're a professor. A professor's wife must be beyond reproach. That I know. I saw those houses, guessed how people lived in them— Why, I'd ruin your carrer."

"Did you like the way you guessed they lived?" Dave asked quietly.

"It looked—" Eva made a little

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helpless gesture with her hands, unable to express all she was feeling. "Oh, wonderful. Serene and full of beautiful things and—perfect somehow."

"Perfect, yes, if you like that kind of life," Dave agreed. "I do. I think you would too."

"But the gossip. What I've been. The scandal about Bess. You'd be kicked out."

Dave laughed. "Forget it. I've a much better job, full professor, in a big eastern college for next year. So I turn up with a wife, a girl from my home town, a girl I've known practically all my life. That's all. No questions asked. My parents are swell and you'll love them and when they come to visit, they'll back that yarn up to the hilt. And, darling—"

"Yes?"

"I think it would be best to spin some yarn about our marriage being delayed because you had to take care of an invalid mother. That could account for your lack of college education too. And I think you should have it. Would the professor's wife like to go to college while he teached?"

Eva closed her eyes. College, which she had given Bess because she wanted it so much herself. A serene and ordered and respected life. And Dave. Very especially Dave. Dave and love. For her. For always. Eva swayed a little, overwhelmed by it all, because it was too much, more than she had ever dreamed life could hold for her.

"Oh, Dave," she choked. "I'm so happy I'm going to cry."

"Don't you dare," Dave ordered, an odd huskiness in his voice. "Because I'm so happy too that if you crack I will too."

Then they simply clung together, inseparably one, so sweetly one person, so ecstatic that neither could let the other go. They just stood for a long time, before they even kissed. And when they did kiss, it was a promise, a promise each to the other, of the golden future before them.

THE END

They called Jeff Checker the working-girl's detective!

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"I don't know what I've done to you," she protested bitterly, "to have you drag me out here to pose with a beaten-up old lion."

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LOVE COMES TO CAROL

by Francis Flick

Pete mustn't let Carol peek into his heart and see his love for her bursting its seams. He was a newspaper man; soon, he'd be overseas to wherever our troops led and he had nothing to offer a girl like Carol . . . . . .

PETE LANG glanced surreptitiously, once or twice, at Carol as he drove through the crisp fall afternoon. She was so lovely and so angry. Perhaps anger went with the flame of her shining hair and the deep luster of her sea-green eyes. Her slim body was taut with the effort to control the turbulence boiling up inside of her and Pete sighed lustily. He heard Gus on the back seat rescue his plate case when they bumped over a dip in the Long Island road.

If he hadn't caught that sniper's bullet he'd still be on Korea, the New York Graffic's youngest war correspondent; far safer for him than being this close to Carol. Almost, out there in the sweat and mud, he'd forgotten Carol. But not quite. Never quite.

When Pete had returned to the paper to take three months of easy assignments until the wound healed sufficiently for him to take off again, he'd found Carol still working for Hunt, the critic of the paper's radio and television department. And still waiting for the break that would put her on a sixteen inch screen. She ran herself dizzy as Hunt's legman, but no TV producer had snatched her up and Pete suspected she brooded. Most of all Pete wanted her happiness, even if it meant helping her become a television actress.

The boss told him this noon to go out to Bruce Linden's estate, outside Mapleton, and do the best he could with a goofy setup. Linden was a friend of a friend of the boss' and campaigning for mayor of Mapleton, so Pete's story was to be handled with extreme delicacy. Quote, end of quote. It had seemed like another great chance to clutch some publicity for Carol, to get her picture plastered in the *Graffic* and have her talked about, so he'd kidnapped her from under Hunt's thin nose. If Pete could get her picture in the paper often enough, even the TV producers would have to see that she was photogenic as hell.

"I don't see what I do to you to have you get me into such messes," she said bitterly and her lovely eyes

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were cold. "Last week you threw me into a tank with seals, I swam like a mad woman and got my picture taken with my hair dripping seaweed. Now, you drag me out here to pose with a beaten-up old lion. Since you returned from Korea you've been animal slap-happy."

Pete's grey eyes twinkled at her as he grinned. He had a wonderful devil-may-care grin that reached right up into his eyes. He had the gift of laughter in his heart, this tall broad shouldered man, and many a G. I. lying in a muddy ditch could attest to it. Why carry your troubles on your vest, Pete always said, let the heartaches gnaw you where no one else could see. It was his philosophy and he made it work.

"BABY," he said quietly, "this beat up old lion may be the open sesame to a television career, the thing you want most. Don't you know that beat up old lions are good luck charms?"

She glared. "Particularly if they're worn around the neck." After a moment she laughed her lovely low laughter and shook her head hopelessly. "You're so utterly crazy. Pete, even I can't stay furious with you for long. I've wondered if you ever take anything seriously? Anything at all?"

His eyes met hers for an instant and he could feel the impact tear through him. That's what she could do to him. Quickly, he looked back at the road and managed to grin again. He must be careful as hell. He mustn't ever let her peek into his heart and see the love for her bursting out the seams. He was a newspaper man; he'd be gone soon to wherever our troops led, he had nothing to offer a girl like Carol. No real security, no permanence. Sometimes it made it easier to know that Carol wanted nothing from him, except the laughs. Sometimes, but not always.

"You haven't answered me, Pete," she reminded him, her eyes fastened on his lean, tanned face.

"I'm not a very serious guy, baby," he said easily.

"That gate on the right says L I N-D E N," Gus growled. He was the paper's ace photographer and he wasn't liking this assignment.

The private road wound through beautiful maples, brilliant now with their reds and browns of fall, and finally swung before a large white brick house surrounded by emerald lawns. To the right was a swimming pool with chairs and tables clustered beneath orange umbrellas on varicolored tiles. Beyond that were the gardens with Long Island Sound dancing in the sun.

A tall, finely built man with black shining hair and snapping black eyes came around the side of the house when he heard the car stop. The guy looked as though he were ready to step before a movie camera and slay the bobby-sockers. Worse, he looked like an athlete as he strode toward them, a delightful smile on his rugged good looking face as he saw Carol. Pete could see her straighten a little with sudden interest and, without looking, he suspected she was glancing up at this brute from under her long black lashes.

"I'm Bruce Linden." Even the guy's voice was deep and richly mellow. "Pete Lang, isn't it?"

"Right," Pete said pleasantly and climbed out of the car. There was no way out of introducing him to Carol, so Pete sighed and went through the routine. No man in his right mind would thrust the girl he loved at Bruce Linden, even when he knew the girl didn't love him.

Bruce's eyes lit with flattering admiration when he smiled down on Carol, and none of it was lost on her. Pete walked across the grass and started looking for the lion, then he stopped, stared and burst out laughing. The one utterly incongruous touch to the carefully calculated charm of the Linden place was a big cage set on the velvet lawn with the mangiest, most moth-eaten old lion anyone had ever encountered.

"Wow!" Gus exploded.

"This," Carol said firmly, "is where I get off."

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PETE GRINNED at Carol and decided her chic Nassau grey suit with its figure-gracing lines, was much too good for this sad faced lion.

"You gotta give me plenty of cheese cake," Gus growled. "Or this shot will end up on the comic page."

"Let Pete roll up his pant leg and furnish the cheese cake," Carol snapped. "Look at Pete roaring with laughter. I wish," she said bitterly, "I could find life such a huge bowl of titters. The only thing you haven't thought of, master mind, is to have me cuddle with a giraffe."

"Our object is to get your pretty face in the paper," he explained patiently. He walked toward the cage. On a battered name place it said, "NERO, King of the Jungle." Nero opened his toothless mouth right then and yawned hugely.

"This lion is definitely embarrassing." Bruce seemed angry about it; definitely angry. "I'm running for Mayor of Mapleton and the elections aren't far off. I'm running because I'm, well," he smiled down at Carol, "without meaning to sound stuffy, I'm one of the ones who believe decent citizens should take an active part in the running of their local government." Carol's dark eyes glowed her approval, but Pete just shoved a cigarette into his mouth and went on looking at the lion. Once he'd been a political reporter and had grown cynical.

"Two months ago," Bruce's eyes narrowed as he went on, "our Sheriff, a home town boy named Clint Mathews, resigned. Under pressure. He'd been a little overbearing, not wearing his badge well. I, among others, resented being p u s h e d around." He shrugged. "Clint was sore but he resigned and left town, then yesterday this lion arrived for me. On a foot square card tied to the cage, Clint had printed that the lion reminded him of me, so he was giving Nero to me. Not a very funny joke coming from a political enemy of mine." Bruce's face flushed and his mouth thinned into a firm hard line. "It was meant to embarass me and make the voters take my campaign as a joke. Now," he looked directly at Pete, "just how are you going to handle this?"

Pete glanced at Carol and saw that she was impressed with Bruce, tremendously impressed. Even as he looked at her he saw her eyes meet Bruce's and watched the electric spark build between them into a dynamic thing. He felt a little sick. And tireder than any young man ever should be. After a while, he got the old grin working and if his grey eyes were bleak with hurt, Carol didn't notice.

"We'll take the lion out of the cage and have Carol pose with him. We'll....."

"Get in cheese cake." Gus cut in.

"Yeah," Pete said. "Then I'll write a story that you're offering this harmless ratty old lion to any children's group who can dig up a vacant lot. That this lion was sent to you by ex-sheriff Mathews as a gag, but you, remembering your own boyhood, know the fun kids can have with him. Of course you'll pay all feed bills and for Nero's keeper. At least," Pete smiled wryly, "until after the election."

"By then the kids will be sick of him," Bruce agreed enthusiastically and his black eyes held a new respect for Pete. "Say, you're smart. You wouldn't come and work for me as my publicity expert until after election, would you?"

PETE WAS going to tell him to go drop dead when he thought about Carol's sudden excited interest in the man. Bruce Linden seemed to be everything any girl could ask for, all Carol apparently was asking for anyhow, but Pete had to be sure. He thought about all the fun they'd had together, the crazy places he'd taken her before he'd gone to Korea. He'd kept it light, he'd not let any of his love shine through, because once when he'd kissed her she'd stiffened and not laughed for a long time after that.

He thought about the night they'd ridden to Staten Island on the boat in the moonlight and she'd told him about herself and her secret little

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dreams; he'd not told her his dreams because they all held her. She really wasn't made for a career; she was made for a big white brick house and a man who was a serious citizen and had a swimming pool and a cruiser bobbling in the water. Well, Pete had given her some laughs and sometimes he'd lifted her out of the blues of discouragement when a TV producer failed to give her the nod. Maybe Bruce was the answer to everything Carol wanted, but he had to be sure.

"I'll think it over," he told Bruce pleasantly. "I'll look around and let you know."

"I can fix it with your boss through a friend of mine." Bruce was eager about the deal. "And we'd not argue about salary, Pete."

"Pete never argues about anything," Carol said coldly. "Not as long as he can laugh."

"Sure," Pete said. He went to the cage and took the rope that was hanging on one of the bars, he opened the door and fastened it around old Nero's neck. "Come on out, King of the jungle," he said quietly. The lion blinked at him, rubbed his old head against Pete's shoulder and limped down the runway of the cage and onto the emerald lawn. There was something singularly pathetic about this moth-eaten animal. He was being used for a not very funny gag, but once he'd been beautiful and proud and when he'd roared the world must have known he was the king.

"Clint Mathews couldn't have sent a less presentable beast." Bruce shook his head in disgust.

"Come on, Carol," Pete said. "Sit in this chair," he kicked around a blue and chrome number and handed her the rope.

Gingerly, she sat down and finally Gus got things to his liking and took his pictures, he went immediately to the car and climbed in the back seat. Gus had had enough. When Pete led Nero back to his cage, he saw that Bruce was talking earnestly to Carol and she finally smiled up at him and nodded her head. He saw, too, that Bruce was holding her hand as though he never intended letting it go again.

"Could I crawl in with you, Nero?" Pete said and bolted the door.

"Pete," Carol looked just a little embarrassed, "do you mind if I stay out for a swim. Bruce will drive me back to New York later."

"Sure," he smiled and wished he didn't feel as though something had wacked him with a sledge hammer.

"It's really not as though Carol had a date with you, is it, old man?" Bruce gave him the flash of white even teeth and Pete seriously toyed with the idea of smashing his fist into them, just to see if they'd fly pretty through the air. Before he could answer he heard a car slam to a stop with a spray of gravel.

THE GIRL who climbed out of the red convertible had sleek blue-black hair and a thin finely structured face. Once, upon a time ago before Carol, Pete would have straightened his tie and silently whistled because this girl was that kind of a dish. Her smart red wool dress, that exactly matched the color of her car and lipstick, clung to her with a carressing flair. And the way she sort of cocked her head, as she moved toward Bruce with a feline grace, was wonderful.

"If you're not a newspaper man," she laughed at him, "I'll eat you."

"That I'd like." Pete grinned back at her. "I bet you found me out by the shaggy tweed suit."

"Maybe," she drawled and her eyes danced. "Darling," she moved quickly to Bruce. She let her eyes briefly touch Carol, as her hand clung to Bruce's arm with an assured possessiveness. "Is this the newspaper man who's going to save you from that filthy lion?"

Bruce carefully introduced Brenda Morton to Carol, then to Pete. "Mr. Lang is clever," he laughed. "He's offering Mathew's lion to the kids, complete with food and keeper."

"For the run of the campaign," Pete said wryly. He didn't let himself notice Carol's sharp look of annoyance, he couldn't without having

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it jab into him. Funny, a man can give months of his time to a girl, along with his heart, and it means nothing; then she meets a handsome jerk and in the first five minutes she gives him *her* heart. Well, so keep your troubles off your vest, keep 'em hidden so no one can ever see. Keep on laughing.

"You look clever, Mr. Lane." Brenda smiled a slow, intimate little smile at him. It was good and very skillful. Only her eyes didn't smile, they looked wary and wise.

"Carol is staying for a swim." Bruce smiled and took Carol's arm, his fingers pressing it gently. "So, let's skip cocktails, Brenda, until next time."

Brenda stood very still, for just an instant, before she turned to Pete. "The brush-off. Shall you and I have a minor symposium?"

"I'm sorry," he smiled down at her. "I'm a working man."

"And not as clever as I thought," she told him softly as she ran to her big red convertible and slammed the door. She poured in the gas so that she skidded the turn around the house, then straightened with a rush. The white wall tires kicked the gravel as she tore toward the gate.

"I'll let you know about the publicity job, Bruce." Pete looked at Carol, but she was carefully studying Bruce's tartan plaid sport's jacket and he let it go. "Have fun," he said.

"This is the damndest thing I ever poked a camera into." Gus was waiting in the front seat, confident that Carol wasn't returning with them. "Me, the best camera in the world working out on that lion, and you, losing your girl. Wow!" He said nothing until they hit the highway and were headed toward the town of Mapleton and New York, then he said. "What gives? Or do you eat your heart out in silence?"

"Yeah," Pete answered.

"Well, why don't you go in there and pitch for Carol? Why not beat out Brucie's brains?

"I have no estate. No swimming pool. No beat up old lion." The muscle in Pete's jaw jumped. "Carol never has wanted me for anything but just a pal. Or, maybe," he added bitterly, "a laughing hyena." He thought again about the time he'd kissed her and her stiff cold withdrawal. "Oh, nuts," he said.

"Yeah," Gus said.

THEY WERE on the road to New York when he saw the railroad station and swung quickly to the right. "Mind getting a train, Gus?" He pulled diagonally into a parking space. "I want to look around and I'll phone in my story."

Gus didn't say anything, he just got out and lugged his camera and plate case into the station. This hadn't been a happy afternoon for him.

Actually, Pete didn't know why he was staying. He'd suddenly seen the station and succumbed to an almost overpowering impulse. Maybe that was just another name for wanting to stay close to the girl you loved. Hell, maybe anything, when you had a big enough hurt in your heart.

Who knew how or why love came? To Pete it had come swiftly, almost as fast as the wild goose flying. And as stupid. He'd seen Carol her first day at the newspaper and she'd zoomed into his mind and heart. And today she'd seen Bruce Linden and the same thing had happened to her.

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He'd seen it in her sea-green eyes when she looked at Bruce, in the movement of her lovely slim body as it moved almost imperceptibly nearer to him. Wanting a closeness she probably hadn't even understood. And never knowing she'd let her sudden swift love spill out.

Without being able to put his finger on it, Pete didn't like Bruce. It could be that he'd sensed a ruthlessness under the guy's charm, or it could be plain jealousy. The ex-sheriff, Clint Mathews, sending the lion didn't make much sense. For the money involved it wasn't even a good gag. So, the angry deposed sheriff must have had a good reason for his gift.

Without thinking about it, Pete drove past Bruce's estate. He could imagine that he saw Carol in the clear water of the pool, laughing and looking beautiful with the late afternoon sun making bright fire of her hair. He drove on by slowly and knew he was a fool.

There was a sign that pointed off the main road to the right, CASTLE'S INN, it said. And Pete turned and followed the smooth dirt road to an imposing gray stone building overlooking the Sound. Whoever built those turrets, he thought as he lit a cigarette and walked from the parking lot, must have been frightened by a moat.

Inside was sheer luxury. From the deep biege carpets to the knotty pine walls and on to the suits of armor stuck in the corners. A castle yet, Pete grinned. Someone had tossed some heavy money to make this place. The bar was made into a taproom with fine English hunting prints on the pine paneled walls and the heavy oak tables and chairs had been hand-made with wooden pegs at the joints, and rubbed down until they had the sheen of ages.

Pete waited until the fat, pink jowled bartender came to him and leaned across the bar solicititously. "Scotch and soda," Pete said. "Black Label."

The bartender nodded pontifically, the red stone on his little finger catching the lights. Pete made his way to the bank of telephone booths and called his paper. He gave the story of Bruce Linden and the lion to the rewrite desk and went back to the bar. He needed a drink. Maybe he needed two, or a dozen.

"HI," BRENDA said and smiled up from under more long lashes as he slid onto the stool next to her. She was turning the stem of her frozen daquiri glass around in her slender fingers. "I followed you to the station and hid until your camera man stalked off to the train." She laughed delightedly. "I chased you here."

"I'm flattered." Pete grinned as he raised his glass to her. "Here's to your nefarious plans, whatever they may be." He took a long drink, then offered her a cigarette and lit it for her. She watched him through the flame of the match.

"I don't think I like that nefarious crack," she drawled.

"Look, honey, shall we be for real? You didn't follow me just to tell me you love the way my hair sprawls across my forehead."

After a moment, she laughed genuinely. "You get right down to the basic plot, don't you? I've mislaid my guy today and you've let your girl slip away—but good. Maybe I want to cry on your broad shoulder."

"Maybe." He signalled the bartender. They said nothing until he'd replenished their drinks. "And after your cry, what?"

"I intend to marry Bruce." Her mouth thinned out and lost some of its seductive warmth. "He's my kind and I'm his. I don't think you'd like to see Carol get hurt."

Pete crushed out his cigarette, his face hard. "That I wouldn't like," he agreed. "Who's Clint Mathews?"

"A very nice kid who was elected sheriff through Bruce's quiet endeavors. Two months ago he'd stepped on Bruce's toes and resigned. Quick," she snapped her fingers, "like that."

"So, Bruce runs the town," Pete mused.

"His family has lived here since one of them pushed out some Indi-

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ans. In this town Bruce can do no wrong, no matter what," she added softly. "Clint was a fool kid who tried to shove Bruce around a little." She shrugged.

"Maybe the kid was just honest." Pete grinned at her sharp glance of annoyance. He didn't know why he said it. Except that he believed this kid, in a position of trust and responsibility, had taken it seriously enough to bother the big shot, Bruce Linden, and been kicked out. But how? Too many tickets for speeding maybe that Bruce had made him fix, but that didn't add up to anything.

They talked for a while about unimportant things, making amusing, light dialogue and laughing a little. He knew Brenda was at least four miles down the road at Bruce's place; but, then, so was he.

"Hi, Jack." Brenda turned and smiled at a rotund, jolly looking little man standing behind her. "Our host, Pete, Jack Lyons." The men made the usual ceremony of shaking hands and Jack ordered fresh drinks.

"The place is yours, Pete, if you're a friend of Brenda's." Jack beamed. "New in our town?"

"Just a newspaper man on a story about Bruce Linden." Pete beamed back.

"Yeah?" Jack raised his shaggy eyebrows in surprise, or a reasonable facsimile. "Bruce is in the dining room now with a gorgeous redhead."

Brenda's eyes hardened. "I find I'm hungry, Pete." She slid off her stool.

PETE PUT down some bills and got up. "I think," he told her, "that right about now you should be romantically interested in me. I think we're having an important date and we don't give a damn about anyone else."

Her eyes lit and she took his arm possessively. "You made a nice plot. You're an attractive devil and I'm nuts about you." She looked surprised. "Maybe I am, no fooling."

"Pete laughed down at her. "You're fun, honey, and you're beautiful, but you're an awful liar." She laughed with him and it was then that Bruce looked up from his corner table and saw them.

He rose and waved, smiling broadly. "Brenda! Pete!" he called. They pretended not to hear him until he called again impatiently. Then Brenda registered complete amazement and they went over to the table.

Carol's eyes were bright like twin stars when she looked up at Pete and he felt a little sick again. This was the Thing for her, and what she'd probably been waiting for always. This was her love. Pete didn't demur when Bruce, looking at Brenda a little sulkily, insisted that they join him for dinner.

"Have a nice swim?" he asked Carol.

"Oh, wonderful. Afterwards, we talked and Bruce told me all about his plans for Mapleton when he's elected mayor." Her hair was beautiful with the lights shining down on it, Pete thought, and wondered what she'd do if he leaned down and kissed the silly curls at the nape of her neck? Smack him probably.

Jack hovered around Bruce, anxiously trying to suggest food the handsome dark man might like. It was strange that there should be almost obeisance in Jack's attitude toward Bruce. Any guy owning this place shouldn't have to bend the knee to anyone.

Pete looked idly around the room. It was very large with a good sized dance floor in the center and a good small orchestra was playing *Bewitching* from a dias at one end of the room. Not very many diners were here, the room might fill up later, but still Pete speculated on how many it would take to make the place break even. Maybe Jack owned Bruce money. A lot of money.

"Where did Clint Mathews go when he left town?" Pete asked abruptly. You could hear the silence after his question hit and bounce on the table.

After a minute, Bruce managed to smile. "Some small town in Oregon, at least that's where Nero was shipped from. Why?" He kept it pleasant enough, but his black eyes

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bore into Pete's.

"No reason. Curiosity." Pete lit Brenda's cigarette and caught the sudden wariness in her face. Only Carol was frankly interested.

"Well," she said. "where did he go?"

"I think Salem, Oregon. He went, so rumor says, to visit his brother out there." Bruce was obviously holding on to his easy charm with Carol, not letting any of the anger slip through. "Just why this interest in Mathews, Pete?"

He shrugged. "If I should decide to be your publicity man I would have to know all that the opposition has on you. And if Mathews was ditched by you, and run out of town because you were personally sore, it might be hard to handle. I mean," he smiled, "hard to make the voters believe you're the great man. People are funny, they don't like to see earnest young sheriffs shoved around."

An angry red crept into Bruce's face and his eyes burned. "I don't like your nosiness. Clint even drove Jack crazy with his snooping out here, ask him. After he'd been in office a couple of weeks, he took delight in annoying me and my friends. Brenda almost got thrown in jail because *he* said she drove recklessly." He got up and held out his hand to Carol. "Let's dance."

CAROL MOVED like poetry in motion and Pete sighed and looked away. It wouldn't do him any good at all to watch her in Bruce's arms to music. "I'm sorry, Brenda, I can't dance. The leg's still too stiff."

"Lay off Clint," she told him curtly. "Bruce is still burned to a crisp that he sent that lousy lion and you aren't helping things. You know," she leaned her chin on the palm of her hand, "I think I'd go back to New York and forget working for Bruce. I doubt if you two can get along. Especially, since your girl seems to have lost her heart to him."

He'd never intended working for Bruce for one moment, he'd only wanted to find out if the guy were

"Pete never argues about anything," Carol said coldly. "Not as long as he can laugh."

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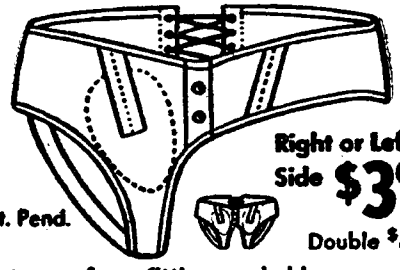

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right for Carol. He had to be sure. But it bothered him that Clint Mathews had sent his gift to Bruce, because he knew that there had to be a reason.

When Carol came back to the table Pete deliberately didn't let himself look at her. As soon as he could, he'd get out of here and go back to New York where he belonged. He'd get hold of his doctor and make him give the green light on his return to Korea; by the time he got back home again he'd be used to the idea of Carol's loving Bruce Linden.

Brenda was trying valiantly to amuse Bruce and Pete tried to help out in the routine. The dinner was excellent and the wine superlative, the music was soft and nostalgic.

"It's my turn to dance." Brenda smiled at Bruce and he shoved back his chair. The orchestra slid from the piece being played into some chords and then into a rhumba and Bruce nodded his head at them in approval. They'd danced a lot together and they were striking, both so dark and both moving with such smooth easy grace.

"Want to go out for some air?" Pete asked and was surprised when Carol got up immediately.

They walked out onto a wide porch leading off from the dining room and stood for a moment at the railing watching the moon come up. It was round and yellow off there behind the trees. There was a snap to the air tonight and that made Pete think of a big log fire and cider.

"Carol," he turned to her and looked down into her lovely sea-green eyes that were looking back at him so steadily. "You've fallen in love, haven't you? You're, you're sure Bruce is what you want?"

She moved abruptly and put both hands on the railing, she stared out into the night. "He's probably the handsomest, most charming and attentive man I ever met," she said huskily. "He takes life seriously and a girl seriously, too."

"Yeah," Pete said. "Yeah."

They didn't talk, they just stood

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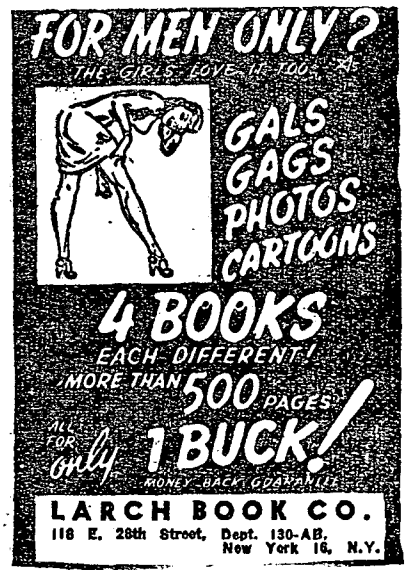

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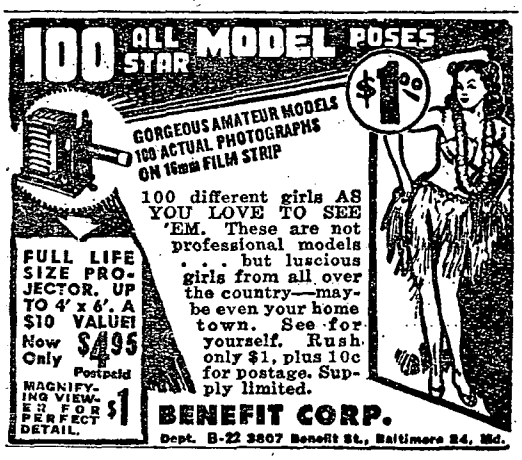
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there looking out at the moon and the trees whispering above them. Finally Carol said, "Let's go back, Pete."

He caught her and pulled her close into his arms. "This is for goodbye, Carol," he said softly. He kissed her then. Her lips felt warm and alive beneath his own and he couldn't stop the urgency in his, the hopeless longing for her. After a while, he let her go and she stood looking up at him, her face white. He waited for her to hit him, expecting it, not caring. But she didn't. She only moved stiffly away from him.

HIS KISS had meant so little that it wasn't even worth a smack across his face. And he laughed for a long time at the bitterness that welled up inside of him. Oh, hell. And he followed her across the beautiful big dining room.

He had to think of something else, so he concentrated on the Castle Inn. No place with this outlay could even pay the help on food and the bar. Then, he got it and smiled. It could pay handsomely if this were just the trimmings.

Pete lit a cigarette at the table and glanced at the clip of matches in his fingers. "Castle Inn" it said across the top, then there was a picture of a gray castle with "Jack Lyons" lettered at the bottom. "What do you say we play a little roulette tonight?" he asked and slipped the clip of matches into his pocket. "I feel luck coming over me."

Bruce laughed. "Our newspaper man is feeling gay."

"He's always gay," Carol said flatly. "Everything is just one big fat laugh."

Bruce patted her hand. "Let's see if his luck's running."

The elevator took them to the second floor, which had been given over entirely to the gaming rooms. They were beautifully laid out and even at this early hour, they were fairly crowded. You sank ankle deep into the carpet and the paintings on the walls were good, very good.

Pete's questions about this place had been answered. The rest was

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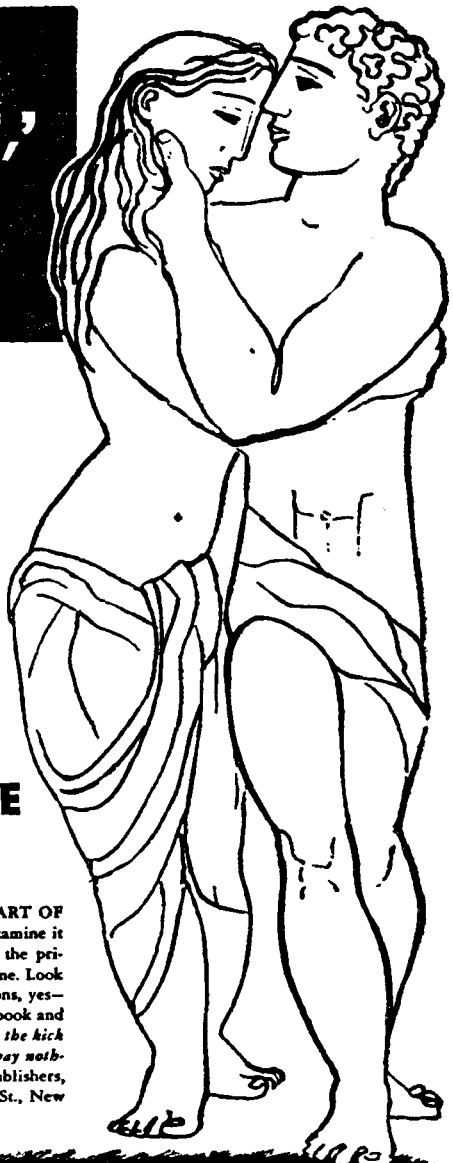

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just front for the gambling. To make it look good he had to play a few numbers. When he laid down his first bet, he saw Bruce nod briefly to the coupier. He won and quit when he was ahead a couple of thousands.

"Your luck rode with you," Bruce said pleasantly. "Can you see me in the morning at eight o'clock?"

"I'd meet myself driving back from New York," Pete protested. "That's too early."

There was that flash of anger again in Bruce's face. "I want to see you at eight," he said and spaced his words carefully.

Pete shrugged. "Then I better be on my way. Carol, are you..."

"She's going to stay at my place for a few days, Pete," Brenda told him evenly, but her mouth twisted with the effort. Brenda had had her orders.

"Can you fix it with Hunt?" Carol asked anxiously, "I can't lose my job."

"Sure," Pete smiled. "Night everyone." Then he touched Carol's flaming hair gently. "Bye, baby," he said gently.

Jack met him as he got off the elevator and held out a card. "Membership," he explained and seemed anxious to please. "You must have it to be admitted to the upstairs rooms."

"Thanks." Pete tucked it into his wallet. "And thanks for the money Bruce let me win." Jack looked vaguely surprised, but he only shrugged. "I'll see you around, Jack."

Pete walked out into the cool night, the air felt good against his hot face. He wondered if he'd be

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slugged for the money they'd let him win. But nothing happened and he started his car and drove out the dirt road.

The shadows of the trees made intricate patterns on the road in the moonlight and Pete thought that it was really a night for love. Especially, for a man who'd left his girl with another man. The loneliness whipped in at him and he wished he were ten thousands miles away.

DRIVING DOWN the main street he saw the Mapleton Hotel and stopped. He was running his life on impulse today, he decided, and went in and registered. If he had to see Bruce in the morning to tell him to go to hell, he might as well stay here and get some sleep.

His room was about as bad as a room could be, facing the street with a red neon sign blinking on and off. Pete snapped off the light and sat down in a chair by the window, letting the neon give his room a bright rosy glow. And, because he'd go nuts if he sat here thinking about Carol and the warmth of her lips against his own when he kissed her, he thought about Clint Mathews and his gift.

Why should the kid send that beaten up old lion to Bruce Linden? It couldn't be just a gag, it had to mean something. A last slap at his enemy, an ironic jest. Pete sighed and took out the clip of matches he'd picked up at Castle Inn. The flash of the red neon sign lit up the clip so that he unconsciously read the words. "Well, I'll be damned," he said quietly and sat there staring at them for a long time. He remembered Jack hovering around Bruce at the table and that obeisance in his attitude toward him. It all stacked up.

Pete moved fast to the telephone and called his paper. He got Joe on the rewrite desk and told him to hold the story on Bruce Linden until he phoned back. It took some arguing and a firm reminder of a past favor rendered, but since the *Graffic* was a morning sheet, Joe

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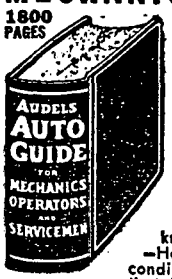

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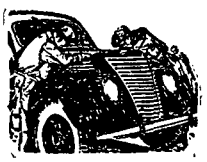

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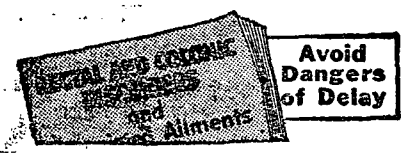

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agreed to hold up until midnight.

There was no point in trying to trace Clint Mathews in Salem, because if Clint had concrete proof of what Pete now knew, he would have used it and never resigned. If he had had proof he could use, he wouldn't have sent his gift. Whistling softly, Pete went down through the lobby and picked up his car at the curb. He headed back to Castle Inn.

Even if Carol had to find out that Bruce was a louse and not the solid citizen he claimed, it couldn't hurt her irreparably. There hadn't been time for her to completely lose her heart to the handsome big guy. There couldn't have been when she'd only seen him for the first time today, yet Pete wasn't sure and it gnawed at him.

Back at the Inn, Jack was welcoming a pompous man and his wife, helping them into the elevator with a fine flourish. Pete waited until he turned, then he beckoned him.

"Bruce and the girls have gone to Brenda's," Jack told him regretfully. "But maybe you want to lose back some of my money to me, eh?" He chuckled at his hilarious joke.

"I came to give you a tip for free," Pete said and his eyes were hard grey granite. "You've been decent and I don't like to see a dope get hung on a limb. Like Clint Mathews did." A couple of drops of sweat popped out on Jack's forehead. "I'm going to do a story that will burn up this joint. I've a big hunch that Bruce is in this gambling with you and I'm going to tell the citizens the kind of mayor he'd make. If I were you, I'd get out tonight. I'd scram. Where's Brenda's place?"

Jack managed to stammer directions. "You're crazy about Bruce," he protested and Pete winked at him and slammed out of the Inn.

He couldn't take a chance on having Carol hurt any more than she would be; he had to make her understand how things stacked up. And he had to do it without actual proof, with only an ironic joke that an angry kid had sent and a hunch. For a good newspaper man to do what

[*Turn To Page 94*]

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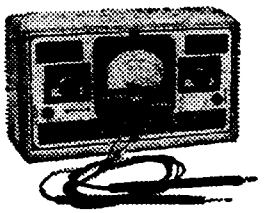

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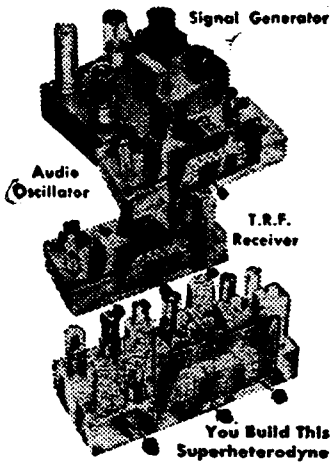

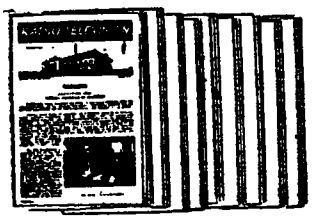

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Pete was going to do was nuts. He'd been taught to always get the facts before he broke a story, yet tonight he was forgetting it.

BRENDA'S PLACE set back from the road in a grove of trees and Pete ground to a stop beside her red convertible and a dark blue Cadillac. He grinned when he saw Brenda open the front door, waiting for him to come.

"Are you crazy?" she whispered. "Jack phoned and Bruce is raging."

"Relax, beautiful." He patted her shoulder.

"Bring him in here!" Bruce shouted.

It was nice, Brenda's living room. Cozy with chintzes and rows and rows of books, a lived in room. Carol got up from the couch and came to Pete quickly. She put her hand on his arm and looked up into his face. "What's happened to you, Pete? Why did you talk to Jack that way."

"I'm sorry, baby," he said quietly and covered her hand with his own. "But I can't let you love a bum. I, I can't let you get your heart smashed up. Don't you see?"

"Well, I don't!" Bruce stood there, his feet spread, his hands clenched. "Talk fast and it better be good."

Pete grinned and lit a cigarette slowly. He let out a long plume of smoke. "You fired Clint Mathews because the kid got wise to the fact that you are partners with Jack in his Castle Inn gambling joint. Tomorrow I'll prove it."

Bruce laughed harshly. "I think the injury you got on Korea was in the head. You're nuts."

"Unhuh," Pete smiled, he crossed his fingers and hoped luck rode with him on his bluff. "The ex-sheriff really was the one who told me how it was. He hates your guts for what you did to him, so he sent that lion, hoping some bright brain would connect it up with Jack *Lyons,* your partner at the Inn. And figure it out from there. I work for a big newspaper, Bruce, I'm their ace reporter and they'll follow my lead. If I tell them I can get the proof and

[*Turn To Page 96*]

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break a scandal up here in the mayoralty race, they'll believe me and they'll put all the facilities behind me. And I can do it."

Bruce stared at him for a long, long time. "I had to have money," he finally said and his voice was no longer rich and deeply mellow. "It was simple for me to be Jack's partner since I control the town. But why have you busted into my affairs? I let you win two grand tonight, wasn't it enough?" His voice rose a little out of control.

Pete reached in his pocket and dropped the two thousand he'd won on a small end table. "Put it down that I can't let Carol get mixed up with a heel." He heard her gasp and he could feel the palms of his hands get moist. "Just say that I can't let the girl I love get hurt."

"Oh, for the love of heaven," Bruce exploded. "I'm marrying Brenda and Carol only....."

"You keep quiet," Carol yelled at him, her eyes bright with anger. "What do you want him to do, Pete?"

"Close his joint and send for Clint Mathews. Explain that it was a mistake and get your town ready to write Clint in on the ballot for Mayor. Bruce has plenty of money, so it's time he left this lovely little town alone." Pete saw the sneer twist Bruce's mouth. "If you don't, the story I'll run about you and the lion in the morning will curl your toes. I called the paper and they're holding the fable about the lion and the kids until I phone back."

BRENDA WALKED over and put her arm through Bruce's, her face almost shone with happiness. "He'll do it, Pete, I'll guarantee it. Let your story about the kids and Nero run. And now," she smiled, "goodnight."

They went out quickly. The moon was high now, sailing through the clouds. Pete helped Carol into the car and said nothing as he drove out

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through the gates and onto the highway. He didn't know what to say and he prayed that she wouldn't start crying.

The silence grew and once, when he surreptitiously glanced at Carol, she was staring straight ahead. But he knew from the tautness of her slender body that she was boiling.

"Aren't you going to say anything?" she burst out.

"I couldn't let you break your heart over that guy. Brenda's tough and she can handle him. But not you, Carol." His fingers clutched the wheel until they showed white. "I can't have you hurt, I love you too much for that."

Before Pete knew what was happening she was in his arms and he just managed to get the car stopped on the shoulder of the road. He grabbed her and held her tight against his thumping heart.

"For months and months I've waited for you to say you love me and for months and months you've only had fun and laughed." Her voice trembled. "When I saw another man go for me today I practically threw myself into his arms, it was such a relief. Oh, Pete, darling, how I love that beaten up old lion for fixing this all up for me."

"Darling," Pete said softly, "I told you beat up old lions are good luck charms."

He kissed her then and the whole world rocked. The moon slid out from behind a cloud and winked down at them, then slid away again. But Pete and Carol didn't even know it. Nor even care.

THE END

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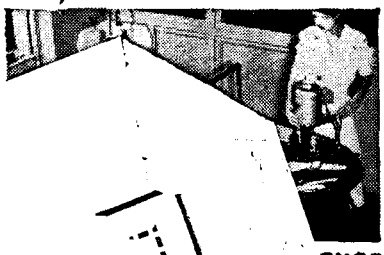

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